

# Not ready

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This wasn't meant to be a book. What is it?  
A novelized tabletop roleplaying game transcript?

Even though the protagonist is of a tender age,  
this book invokes topics that might prove themselves  
overly dark and disturbing for children.

Before reading, ensure you have the latest version:  
<https://monk.unboiled.info/writing/not-ready>

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# Not ready

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## **(Not) qualified**

Content over two things at once, Grip squeezed out of the humming kitchen. When they took dad away, adults stopped visiting them. And since mom skipped an expedition to stay at home for birthday, that would've been really sad if no one came around. But nope, guests kept pouring in, as if some floodgates had opened. So Grip paraded to his room with a wide smile, juggling trains of pleasant thoughts and opening lizard on the go.

Lizard came out of the blue, setting his linguistic school ablaze. English is who-knows-how-many centuries old, so Maria Stepanovna knows well how to teach that, but lizard? Until yesterday there was obscenely little course material to begin with. Dry exercises couldn't quench Grip's curiosity about the actually interesting stuff: what are they like, the lives of the first sapient extraterrestrials we've met? What do they think about? What do they live and breathe? It was weird to regurgitate

phrases like “[exist] [food’], [I] [go]”, yet have zero idea as to what do these lizards eat, whether they obtain food from grocery stores and what are their shops and canteens like. Their alien daily life aside, the very concept of scribbling signs that people have incessantly praised him for, but no lizards would ever see, was a strange idea all in itself. Grip yearned for a lizard visiting Rosario one day, once they finally agree to leave their home planet, and at least nodding to him, like, “yeah, that is true, this is, indeed, our language, I do understand you, and yes, I do go grab some food once in a while”.

So the “updates available” icon across the course was a surprise present to Grip, a New Year coming early. Just imagine — yesterday he heard recordings of lizards speaking! Though it turned out he doesn’t quite have what it takes to replicate those clicks and rattles, anatomically speaking. And no one was there for him to explain their fairly straightforward signs-to-speech mapping. But he had almost a day to let that little bummer fade, and today he had the second part of the treasure trove to indulge in.

At last, first stories straight out of the lizardland, a breath of fresh air after all these soulless “[you] [sleep-not]”, “[ours] [go-?] [living place’]” and “[I] [know] [aforementioned’], [you] [know-not] [aforementioned’]”. He swallowed them whole, one-by-one, starting from the ideologically correct:

[exist] [living place-in] [ours'],  
[exist] [down-in] [aforementioned'].  
[outside-in] [be-hot], [ours] [be-hot-not].  
[living place] [be-new], [exist-not] [food'],  
[exist] [up-in] [food'], [ours] [be-wise-er] [sun-of],  
[ours] [rejoice], [ours] [be-hot-not].  
[we] [be-tired], [we] [want] [eat'].  
[tails] [we-of] [be-tails] [we-of-not].  
[we] [be-proper], [exist-not] [food'],  
[exist] [living place-in] [be-purpose] [we'],  
[living place] [aforementioned] [be-purpose] [ours-of].  
[ours] [be-hot-not] [be-together] [living place-in],  
[exist] [food'], [we] [sleep].

(suggested translation as provided in Federal methodological course on Epsilon Indi 3 language, second edition)

We're at our new living place, the living place lies deep.  
It's hot outside, but not where we are.  
The living place is deep and there's nothing to eat here,  
all the food is up there. But we rejoice,  
we're smarter than the sun, and we're in the cold.  
We're tired, we're hungry, our tails don't feel like ours,  
but we've done a great job, we're good with no food.  
We're in a useful living place, everyone benefits from it.  
We're together in a cold living place, we've got food, we sleep.

... snacking on a fairly understandable koan:

[legs] [be-wise-of] [be-strong-not],  
[brain] [be-wise-of] [be-strong].  
[be-wise] [know] [angles'],  
[be-wise] [know] [purpose'].  
[be-wise] [know] [interesting'],  
[be-wise] [be-purpose-er] [be-strong-of'].  
[hold] [be-wise'], [see] [be-wise-of'],  
[want] [be-wise'], [ours] [be-wise].

(suggested translation from the same source)

Legs of the wise are weak,  
brain of the wise is strong.  
The wise knows the angles,  
the wise knows what to do,  
the wise knows a lot of interesting things,  
the wise is more useful than the strong.  
The wise is taken care of, the wise is listened to,  
others want to be wise, others are wise.



... and, one by one, worked all the way through to the finishing story. A fairly dubious one:

[exist] [up-in] [outside-in] [living place-of] [I].

[I] [hold] [food'], [exist] [food'].

[ours] [sleep] [down-in], [I] [sleep-not].

[ours] [sleep-not], [ours] [know-not],

[ours] [think] [hold'] [danger'].

[I] [see] [down-in] [ours'],

[I] [know] [exist-not'] [danger'].

[exist] [down-in] [I],

[exist] [down-in] [food'].

[I] [rejoice], [ours] [rejoice].

[aforementioned] [be-proper], [I] [be-proper].

(suggested translation from the same source)

I'm outside, above the living place.

I've got the food, it's here.

They sleep down there without me.

They woke up, they don't know what's happening,

they think they're in danger.

I know they're not.

I'm back with the food,

I rejoice, we all rejoice.

This is proper, I am proper.

*“You’re not good, you’re shady,”* Grip mumbled and touched the last sign accidentally. The dictionary pop-up has obligingly informed him, that this sign should be translated as “proper”. All while Grip could swear it always meant “good”, at least in the first edition.

Maybe once he learns what has been refined since, the overall meaning would become clear. Or maybe not. It’s not like changing “good” to “proper” has clarified much.

---

Grip had zero doubt these texts were fairy tales, bits of lizard wisdom told to young lizards by adult lizards in order to teach them how to lizard.

So, when Wednesday class came around, and excited Maria Stepanovna has announced they’re supposed to write a short story in return (*“I’ll pick the best ones and send them by special comms. The best ones among all planets will then be read by actual lizards!”*), Grip knew exactly what to enrich the alien culture back with: a fairy tale of his own people.

*The golden egg<sup>1</sup>*

*One old woman and old man  
had a multicolored hen.*

*And an egg was once laid by the hen,  
Not a regular one, but a golden one.*

*The old man smashed the egg, to no avail.  
The old woman crushed the egg, to no avail.  
But a mouse running by, with one wave of its tail,  
Made the egg fall down and break.*

*The old man and old woman have wailed,  
Till the hen clucked for tears to be saved,  
For another egg soon will be laid,  
Not a golden one, but a regular one.*

Cramming the older-than-space-travel action-packed source material into the confines of a language fundamentally unfit for expressing transitions, time, and pretty much every single involved human concept took hours of toiling, compromising and creativity. But Grip persisted and ended up re-reading this:

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<sup>1</sup> author's translation loosely follows Ушинский К. Д. Собрание сочинений. Т. 6.  
— 1949, с. 43

[hold] [animal'] [be-purpose],  
 [aforementioned] [go] [hold] [food'].  
 [inside-in] [object-of] [purpose-of-not'] [tradition-of-not'].  
 [be-old] [hold] [object'], [object] [be-open-not]. [be-proper-not].  
 [be-old-er] [hold] [object'], [object] [be-open-not]. [be-proper-not].  
 [animal] [be-second] [go],  
 [aforementioned] [be-small] [be-purpose-not].  
 [tail] [animal-of] [go],  
 [object] [go] [down'],  
 [exist] [down-in] [object'],  
 [object] [be-open]. [be-proper-not].  
 [animal] [be-purpose] [know] [be-proper'],  
 [animal] [be-purpose] [show] [be-proper'].  
 [aforementioned] [go] [hold] [food']  
 [inside-in] [object-of] [purpose-of] [tradition-of].

And, to proactively dispel any possible doubts about the immense didactic and entertainment value of this timeless classic to his human culture, Grip topped it off with a closing remark of his own:

[be-olds] [show] [aforementioned'],  
 [be-news] [know] [rejoice].

Turns out, Grip's classmates didn't quite share his dedication, wrote about themselves first and foremost, for some reason, and, in general, were sloppier about the assignment. Most of his friends admitted they hadn't read the new texts yet.

Maria Stepanovna was outright puzzled by Grip's choice, but she just stated, with great restraint, that she sees no mistakes.

---

Saturday was rather forgettable, and so was the first half of Sunday. And then they came for him.

Silina Vasilyevna heard the knocking, opened the door and instinctively froze in place. And so did Grip, once he stumbled out of the room. Adam Ashotovich was framed by two tall guys in black uniform. The uniform Grip saw only once before: the morning they came for dad. This time they weren't alone, though, but rather posed as an ominous background for the simultaneously worried and joyous Sinitsyn.

His eyes met Grip's, and he exhaled with relief:

*"Grip Avdotievich? Stavropolskiy?"*

Grip nodded back.

*"Sinitsyn, Adam Ashotovich. We've got an important, urgent job for you. Can we come in?"*

It was as sudden as... him being so down to earth? The last time Grip saw the head of the planet was the centennial solidarity of the workers demonstration. He was giving a speech from

the steps of the administration building, detailing Federation's achievements of the previous century, a well-formed, captivating, exalted speech. And there he was, awkwardly turning into the kitchen, like a regular person who stopped by for a cup of tea, slightly uncomfortable because he's never been here before. Wait, they haven't left their phones. Dad always insisted that the kitchen is for food and talking only. Anyway, it was clearly an inappropriate moment to bring up the unusual house rule.

Adam Ashotovich sat down, Silina took a seat to the side of him. The chair across was, obviously, Grip's. The pair in black weren't quite tying the room together— a thought that probably crossed Sinitsyn's head as well, as he immediately sent them away. The intimidation levels went down considerably.

*“So, Grip, they say you're interested in lizards and know their language well.”*

*“Not so well...”*

*“Oh, cut the modesty,”* comrade Sinitsyn smiled wider. *“Wanna go to Epsilon Indi 3? But you need to depart right away.”*

*“What? Yeah, maybe,”* Grip replied, dumbfounded.

*“For how long?”* Silina inquired.

*“That's no simple question,”* Adam Ashotovich went serious.

*“Depends. If it falls apart, you'll be back in three days. If it pans out, you'll become our ambassador.”*

That hasn't dispelled Silina's concern in the slightest.

*“At most?”* she intoned.

*“One year at most,”* assured Sinitsyn. *“What are they, animals?”*

*They should understand that human kids are better off growing among humans. And we sure understand you shouldn't fall behind your studies, so you'll be tutored while you're there, individually."*

The kitchen went silent.

*"Uh... but why me?"*

*"Ah! Right! Because of that essay of yours,"* the head of the planet started squirming, sifted through his pockets and produced a tiny slip of paper. *"Read, I don't know a single lizard word, y'know."*

*"We don't understand'. 'That is interesting',"* Grip translated effortlessly. *"Is that their answer? Are you sure that means they liked it?"*

*"As I understood it, they just went 'good' or 'bad' on all the others. And yours was the only one to earn such a detailed review. Congratulations, you've managed to somehow pique their interest."*

*"You mean, my essay was selected? Out of all the others?.. And I'm the one to fly there?"* Grip asked, full of doubt to the brim.

*"Yes,"* Sinitsyn stated plainly.

Grip wasn't buying any of this.

*"And... what am I supposed to do there?"*

*"Establish contacts with lizards. Inter-, uh, inter-civilizational relationships on all levels, y'know, between kids as well."*

*"That's interesting. We don't understand,"* Grip remixed.

*"Neither do I, to be honest,"* the head of the planet went down to

earth again. *"I know next-to-nothing, just like you. My job is to send you to Arkadia. Secrets, intelligence services, all that stuff, so, y'know, you'd have to keep quiet until it gets declassified."*

*"Intelligence services?"* Grip repeated.

*"Is it dangerous?"* Silina asked.

*"Not at all,"* Sinitsyn started reassuring her, *"of course it's safe, everything's by the book, adults would be within reach at all times, and he can return anytime he wants. Just, y'know, no synchronous communication, naturally."*

That was no summer camp voucher, but Silina didn't look overly worried. If anything, she looked distanced.

*"And, excuse me, how am I supposed to establish contacts,"* Grip asked, *"when I can read and write, but not speak?"*

*"Well... they rattle and click, don't they? Of course you can't. And if someone can, they'll teach you."*

In the middle of this phrase, Silina stood up and left the kitchen.

*"And what are we supposed to talk about?"*

*"I told you, I don't know! They'll probably explain that on Arkadia, if you agree to go. Or maybe later, once you're there. Aren't you curious to ask them all about how they live?"*

*"Of course I am. I read what they wrote, and it's not very clear."*

*"And there you go, go ask them directly. Or maybe not just ask, but see for yourself."*

*"Alone?"*

*"Of course not, why would we let you go alone?"*

*"No, I mean... Will I be the only child?"*



*"Ah. No, there will be two of you. You, from the Federation, and another one, from the Fist."*

*"Fist?"*

*"Yes," Sinitsyn confirmed. "It's a joint mission."*

Grip took a pause, yet it wasn't the fists he was thinking about:

*"And they've picked me? Out of the entire Federation?"*

*"Oh, here we go again," Adam Ashotovich complained quietly.*

*"When I need a handful of people, it's 'glad to serve'. But every time I need just one, it's always 'why me?'... Yes, correct. Yours was the one selected from Rosario, then they picked several, read them to the lizards, and lizards found yours interesting."*

*"The most interesting one? But not the best one?"*

*"Maybe sometimes it's more important to be interesting? Besides, if you need to pick just one, but there were several 'good', how to pick the best one?"*

While the argument held merit, he clearly came up with it on the spot, revealing he didn't know much about the selection process.

*"We'll keep your little trip secret for a while—" he resumed, but got interrupted by Silina's voice from another room:*

*"Grip!"*

They both went to Grip's room. Silina stood across the bed with a bag on it.

*"Oh that's nice, you've packed the bag already!" Sinitsyn remarked with admiration and backed out of the room. "Tref, Kornoukhov, come'ere!"*

*"Mom, are you sure?"*

*"They say Federation needs you there," Silina replied, crouching, "And you've always said you want to know how lizards live."*  
*"That's right..."* Grip couldn't put a finger on why he's objecting.  
*"I also worry about you, Grip. Just write me, and if something happens, go back right—"*

The pair in black have entered the room, making Silina go quiet and hug Grip instinctively.

The men started doing something strange: one began to unfold Grip's clothes, while the taller one hovered above and took pictures of them.

*"Nothing but clothes here!"* the shorter one said without stopping for a moment. *"Grip, do you need anything else?"*

Grip pondered for a while.

*"A phone?"*

*"They'll hand you one just like yours,"* Adam Ashotovich brushed it off, *"Think bigger, you can order anything, And if you don't come up with something now — worry not, you still got time to think."*

*"Two shots",* Grip said unexpectedly.

Everybody stopped to give him prolonged looks.

*"Two cylindrical glass... small glasses. Not tapered, ideally, empty on the inside—",* he started gesturing.

*"Nah, I get it, I—"* Sinitsyn asked, pulling the phone out. *"What for?"*

*"That's a secret,"* Grip was pleased with himself. *"I'll explain later."*

*"Whatever you say, y'know,"* the head of the planet replied from

behind the phone. *"You'll have these shots, no problem."*

The guys in black packed the clothes back and headed out.

*"We'll be there,"* said the shorter one.

*"We'll wait outside,"* Sinitsyn confirmed. *"Catch up, Grip".*

*"Take the bag,"* Grip noticed the bag on the bed.

*"Nah, we're sending you through special comms",* Adam Ashotovich paused on his way out to shake his head. *"We'll print everything on the other end."*

Silina's jolt of decisiveness was, seemingly, running out. Grip hugged her as hard as he could, she kissed him, and he dashed out. After all, if they say he can come back anytime, they mean it.

He almost caught up with Adam Ashotovich at the front door. The two in black were waiting and chatting nearby. Grip managed to overhear *"...always were an idealist, Prostov, and you still are"*, before they suddenly started looking awfully busy and went to open a black car. The young one rode shotgun, the older, taller one, sat at the back, as Sinitsyn took the wheel. Grip sat diagonally across him and inspected the interior. He's never been inside a car, not counting the expedition rover, of course. The car started moving. Now Grip was staring at his oh-so-familiar town from a totally new perspective.

*"Congrats, kiddo! Joining the military at such a young age!"* the closer one suddenly said without a trace of irony.

*"Uh-huh, the guy's in fifth grade and got two jobs already, what's not to love,"* his mate in the front replied bitterly.

*"Military?"* Grip got confused.

*"Reconnaissance of new planets, especially ones with sentient life, falls under intelligence services,"* Sinitsyn confirmed, focused on driving. *"And that'd be military. But you'll be more of a diplomat there, than an agent."*

*"Or three jobs,"* the one at the front has interjected.

*"Oh, Kornoukhov, tell me you haven't dreamt of being an agent when you were a kid,"* Tref launched an attack on him.

*"I haven't,"* Kornoukhov countered.

*"Oh, come on,"* the head of the planet suddenly sided with Tref.

*"Everybody wants to."*

*"I didn't even know it was an option,"* Kornoukhov doubled down.

*"Su-ure, now you'll be telling us you've never ever heard of Fist spies,"* Tref sneered.

*"Of course I had, but that's spies,"* backed off Kornoukhov.

*"Oh yeah, their spies are nothing like our agents,"* Tref continued.

*"OK, calm down,"* Kornoukhov cheered up unexpectedly. *"You got me, that was stupid. But they sure forgot to tell me I can enlist at 10."*

*"And how do you envision that? A field trip? Where to? The Palace of Reconnaissance?"* Tref pried.

*"It occurs to me, now the four of us know how it looks like,"* Grip interjected.

*"You're right,"* Kornoukhov admitted from the front seat.

*"You pack some style, Grip,"* Tref praised him cryptically.

Sinitsyn kept quiet and focused on driving onto the square. He left the car right in front of the stairs, the stairs he'd been

addressing the crowd from two years ago. All four of them ran up the stairs, entered the hall and immediately followed the head of the planet left, through some unremarkable door and onto the underside of the administration. It was dark, narrow, and in the brief half a minute Grip had to jump over quite a few weird hoses running across.

And then they abruptly ended up in a bright room, where they've been awaited by some bored-looking woman.

*"At last! I've been waiting— So, you? How much do you weigh? Thirty kilos?"*

As soon as Grip approached her, she looked closely and uncere-  
moniously into his left eye.

*"Don't just stand like this, lay down over there, I'll be quick. Gonna finish with you and leave..."*

The woman hid behind another door. Sinitsyn has nodded reassuringly. Grip was still squirming, settling on a sofa, and she already returned to inject something into his arm. Grip immediately froze up. She once again looked into his unblinking eye, muttering:

*"Worry not. Lights out, in a blink of an eye, here you go, yeah, and now you're no longer my..."*



## **(Not) allied**

Grip had a headache and didn't want to wake up. When he gave up, moved and opened his eyes, he saw some creep towering aside.

*"Get up, agent!"* somebody cheered out loud. *"Your first hop is over, Grip, so, from now on, you've got nothing to fear."*

Somebody other than the looming gloomy man, as his lips weren't moving. He was, though. He approached Grip, looked him in the eye and stated:

*"Shot you up with some garbage, eh. Does your head hurt? Get up, stand on one leg."*

Grip shoved the blanket aside and immediately curled up from the chill. His body didn't follow through the movements the right way, and there was some unfamiliar lightness to his body. He sat up, shivering, noticed the second man by the door, stood up clumsily, stretched his arms out and lifted one leg.

*"You're gonna be alright. Gonna hurt for a while, yeah, but that'll*

*subside.”*

Grip sat back and wrapped himself in a blanket. One thing that did not subside was the awkward lightness.

*“So, eh, you’re one healthy young fella, not sick at all, I got almost nothing to fix about you,”* the gloomy man spoke to Grip rapidly. *“Strengthened the bones, cleaned the teeth, extracted the stones, just the standard stuff. You won’t notice a thing. Stay healthy.”* the man turned to the door. *“That’s it, he’s yours,”* and left without further ado.

There was something odd about his gait.

*“Glad to meet you, Grip Avdotievich, and welcome to Arkadia!”* Grip stopped following the leaving man and turned his attention to the other one: young, tall guy, similar gait.

*“I’m gonna be your boss. Name’s Dmytro Ivanovich. Dmytro Ivanovich Derevyashko,”* he introduced himself in a friendly tone and sat down next to Grip.

*“Hello.”*

Grip averted his eyes to inspect this ridiculously cold suit of his. No threads, no seams — expensive, printed.

*“That’d be your work suit, as I understand. It’s hot on Epsilon Indi 3, so you’ll wear this. Hang in there, we’ll try on a few more.”*

Grip followed his gesture with his eyes. The night stand featured Grip’s well-worn bag, stacks of clothes and four glass shots. Dmytro Ivanovich handed him another suit, a heavier, much denser one, with a transparent full-face hood.

*“Here, grab that suit— nah, on top of this one, you’re gonna wear*



*one over another. Now walk around, squat — is it alright? Too tight, maybe?”*

He noticed Grip's clumsiness and went on with:

*“Yeah, our gravity's lower, so you'll be a superman for a while. Don't get too used to it though, the lizards have it closer to yours.”*

Grip found nothing to complain about, and didn't know where to look for.

*“Great! Your next one would be printed a size smaller then. OK, cut it, put on your stuff,”* he said, as he started to unpack the bag. *“And this one is?”* Grip asked, pointing at a tidy stack of blue fabric, and started to change into his regular clothes. Clothes very similar to his regular clothes.

*“Dress uniform,”* Derevyashko replied. *“You can skip that one. Everybody has it, but it's not really needed. Come back for the award ceremony, then you'll make use of it.”*

*“What's this, huh?”* Grip found a small plastic bag and put it against the light. The bag looked empty.

*“Kidney stones,”* Derevyashko found that funny. *“Printed separately. Means your water ain't that great over there.”*

*“What for?”* Grip was puzzled. There were, indeed, small specks in the corner of the bag.

*“Like, they're part of you. We're supposed to hand them to you. Makes no sense to print them inside your kidneys.”*

*“No, why spend energy and print them at all?”*

*“Oh, the Federation sure hasn't gone broke on them micrograms. I mean, you can barely see them,”* Dmytro Ivanovich reasoned.

*“And what am I supposed to do with them?”* Grip stayed perplexed.

*“I’ll dispose of that,”* Derevyashko smiled and took the bag away.

Grip grabbed a phone, a new one, not a scratch on it, and found himself looking at the news for a minute. Life was much more intense over here, everything was unusually vivid, and it seemed like there were more convents, gatherings and meetings every hour than Rosario had in a month. Dmytro Ivanovich waited patiently, clearly interested in the four shots. When Grip was about to put the phone down, he’s gestured to hand it over, opened the contact list and handed the phone back. All the contacts were greyed out, but the topmost one: *“Derevyashko Dmytro Ivanovich”*.

*“Here’s mine, just in case. Go on, tell mom you’re fine.”*

There was no “call” button across her entry, so Grip sent a message: *“Hopped fine, stones are no longer in the kidneys, congratulate me on my first boss.”*

Derevyashko smiled supportively and almost proceeded to ask about the shots, but Grip carefully approached the window, drew the curtains open, effortlessly pulled himself up the windowsill and took a look outside.

Almost every single thing looked oddly unfamiliar. It was snowing — a concept Grip was familiar with, in theory. The houses stretched upwards, the street below was brightly lit and full of people walking, gliding, moving around... Were he at the very top or a couple of floors below, the view could be worthy

of a New Year card. From here though, neither the skyline nor the people looked their best. The second time in... no idea how much time Grip remembered the solidarity day from the two years ago. Maybe, viewed from above, solidarity day was the same. Except that there people were moving in an organized way, and here they... just scattered around.

*“Is today some kind of holiday?”*

*“What?”* Derevyashko also approached the window. *“No, it’s always like this here. Don’t be shy, ask questions, it’s OK that you’re a bit disoriented.”*

*“Why is everyone walking their kids then?”*

Now it was Dmytro Ivanovich who was disoriented. He clearly didn’t understand the question at first, then went deep into thinking, then started formulating the answer. Meanwhile, Grip realized one of the teens isn’t gliding on the road itself, but rather hovering on some board of sorts. His eyes followed her as she was getting away.

*“Well, here’s the thing, Grip,”* Derevyashko began. *“You’re from a mining planet, aren’t you?”*

*“Yeah, I am,”* Grip agreed with that unusual, but apt description. *“So, yours is a frontier planet, a less comfortable one, and you all work hard for the Federation’s common good. And the professions are more menial, I mean, I don’t mean like you’re mining uranium with a pickaxe there, I mean, fixing machinery, hauling said uranium, cooking food, washing streets...”*

Grip was nodding along, even though he didn’t know what

“pickaxe” meant and no one washed their streets. But dad used to fix robots, so that ringed true.

*“And here it’s different, almost no factories around, we don’t really produce tangible stuff. Not much to do around here with your hands. People are rather, y’know, scientists, civil servants, writers, engineers, creative folk. No shifts, no brigades, six hours workday whenever they like it the most, for example, three hours in the morning and three in the evening.”*

“That sounds unfair,” Grip was rather hostile about the idea.

*“And the rest is usually spent with kids, to rest,”* Dmytro Ivanovich wrapped it up and prepared to argue.

“To rest? With kids?” Grip mocked him.

*“Oh, as a supervisor to a couple dozens of kids, I do understand your scepticism,”* Derevyashko smiled wide. *“Let’s not make it about myself though, I don’t work for six hours either. See, when you aren’t working with your hands, your rest is markedly different. Say, you’re sitting late in the office, scrambling to find a billion extra nails in Omega for six hours straight, when you’ve got thirty billion ones extra, all in some other systems. If I force you to stay for two more hours, these nails aren’t gonna materialize themselves, unless you come up with something unconventional. But, on the other hand, if I let you go now, you’ll gonna think about them on your commute, at home during the dinner, or worse, the nails are gonna haunt you at night. Now, this is something kids are great at helping with.”*

Having somewhat clarified the grand total of one difference between their planets, Grip returned to the night stand and

started packing.

*“Why are there four shots? I’ve asked for just two.”*

*“We weren’t sure whether you want normal ones or printed ones. These are printed, these are cast.”*

Grip has brought the shots together. The clinking of the printed ones was better. He then promptly stowed them in a bag, leaving Dmytro Ivanovich without the explanations. Instead of asking, he checked his watch. It was so old-fashioned, that shiny bracelet worn on a wrist. Who wears watches these days? Is it a spy gadget? Why make a spy gadget so shiny and noticeable?

*“Alright, let’s go?”*

*“Wait. Will you tell me what am I supposed to do?”*

*“Let’s get you enlisted first.”*

*“Fine. Where are we going?”*

*“Means we’re going to work,”* Derevyashko half-evaded the question.

Walking wasn’t hard, just required some focus. They left the room, spiralled down the staircase of this large institution packed with relaxed people of wildly varying appearance and busy personnel donning white coats, left the building (*“hold on, put on a coat”*) and merged into the foot traffic, one more adult with a kid. Grip tried to look everywhere at once, soaking up impressions just to dilute them down with newer ones, then blend them together into a single incomprehensible mixture. The most memorable one was, probably, the trees smack in between some houses, with no purpose, no barrier, no visible

function. Derevyashko picked up a call, Grip worked on his walking skills, trying to keep up and stick to smaller jumps at the same time, passing a tree after a tree left out there in the cold, snowcapped, forsaken.

Finally, they've stopped in front of another indistinguishable building. Dmytro Ivanovich shook the snow off their coats, and they entered yet another public institution: large staircase, long hallways, people greeting Derevyashko with brief phrases or subtle gestures. Is this Grip's workplace now? Suddenly Dmytro Ivanovich stopped in his tracks between two doors, brightened up, listened for a while, bent down and whispered to Grip:

*"The first impression is the most important one. Spies, diplomats, they all need style. Listen."*

And sneaked cartoonishly towards a closed door, stopped in front of it, one hand on the knob, another one in Grip's way. Grip listened as hard as he could:

*"...late night. No result, zero, it's all set, yet we can't stop watching them. Got nothing on the partner as well. So, I'm like, screw it, I'm off to bed. As soon as I drift off – a flash: 'The new agent has ordered two shots, approve synthesis.'"*

A quiet drawl was the answer. The voice continued:

*"Uh-huh, what would they ever do without me? Anyway, I groan and reply with one eye open: 'Approved. Is he here?'. 'Not yet'. I fall back to sleep, and then, in the morning, it dawns on me! The new agent, not yet — must be Derevyashko's agent!"*

Muffled laughter.

*"What kind of a kid is that—"*

(Dmytro Ivanovich unblocked the way and put his hand on Grip's shoulder...)

*“—who’s not even here yet—”*

(... softly opened the door and pushed Grip inside ...)

*“—but has already ordered two shots...”*

The speaker has noticed Grip and trailed off.

*“Allow me to introduce myself: Grip Avdotievich Stavropolskiy.”*

The redhead in the back of the room buried his face in the hands, but failed to conceal his laughter. The speaker started chuckling, standing in place, leaning on a table. Derevyashko, content with his escapade, slipped past to one of the workspaces.

*“Hello, hello,”* the closer man finished chuckling. He was older than the redhead one and looked quite likeable. *“I’m Aksat Dzhonatanovich.”*

*“I’m Grip.”*

*“You’ve told that already, don’t spoil the impression,”* advised the redhead instead of introducing himself. *“How’s your head?”*

*“Fine, thank you.”*

Derevyashko was writing something on his phone, the redhead fished out a large paper book.

*“The rules say you must swear an oath,”* Aksat Dzhonatanovich said, *“But then the other rules say you can’t, because you’re not eighteen yet.”*

*“Stupid rules, if you ask me,”* Derevyashko interjected. *“Like, you’re too young, and we can’t trust you no matter what. Bollocks.”*

*“So just sign over here,”* the redhead finished, pointing at a book.

*“... What if I don’t have a signature yet?”*

*“You can write down your name.”*

*“Can I practice first?”*

Practicing took time. Grip never learned to write in Russian cursive. But he knew well how to draw lizard signs, so he settled on capital “STA” and a [be-proper] sign, one formerly known as “good”.

*“Congrats on enlisting,” the redhead said and closed the book.*

*“Now, will you tell me what am I supposed to do?”*

*“No,” Derevyashko stated plainly. “I really hope they’ll tell you on arrival. What I can tell you though, is what your goals are.”*

*“And what are they?”*

*“You’re going on a joint mission with the Fist. Your utmost priority is establishing and maintaining diplomatic relationships with those lizards. Put simply, make friends with them. Our kids – their kids. Now, the Fist are cunning bunch, they’ll capitalize on anything they can lay their hands on, lizards included. It’d be wonderful if we ended up as lizards’ best friends. Say, you convince them to leave the planet, check out how people live. Do your best to make sure it’s our teleport the lizard is going in, not theirs. Give it a tour of Arkadia, for example. But, fists being fists, it’s the relationships with lizards that are your top priority. Am I clear? Retell that back to me.”*

*“Loud and clear. Friendship with people comes first, Federation specifically — second. Invite lizards to us.”*

*“Attaboy. The mission itself ain’t secret, cause it’s a joint one, but*



*what exactly happens there still is. You'll have to write daily reports, and, once you're back, we can leisurely decide what to declassify. And that's it."*

*"That's not enough. How do I meet them? How do we befriend them?"*

*"As if I knew. Sorry, I'm not the one to help with that. Never seen a lizard, never learned their language. There should either be a joint briefing... or one on arrival."*

Grip wanted more, but Dmytro Ivanovich spread his hands preemptively.

*"And the second agent?"*

*"We don't know who. But you'll meet soon."*

*"Why me— No, don't get started about the essay. Aren't there some special people to handle this? There are people for everything—"*

*"Like, contactees?"* Aksat Dzhonatanovich snorted.

*"Who?"*

*"The Institute of Contact,"* he elaborated.

*"Their days are numbered, mark my words,"* the redhead commented offhandedly. *"They'll close it."*

*"Calm down, Nostradamus,"* Aksat Dzhonatanovich snorted again.

*"Gentlemen,"* Grip slotted in.

*"Alright,"* Derevyashko took the lead. *"Indeed, there are special people for the job. They, uh, messed up."*

*"How?"*

*"You see, people were worried that we'll bump into aliens, for*

*quite some time, even before the expanse. And it makes perfect sense that the better the aliens are at space-faring, the higher are the chances we'd run into each other. We agreed that when it happens, we'd better come prepared, and thus the Institute of Contact was born. So that, when the day comes, we'll waste no time on the nuances of alienese and cut straight to the part where we're begging them to spare us."*

*"And we met lizards," Grip nodded.*

*"And we met lizards,"*

*"I see... But can we..." Grip trailed off.*

*"We can what?"*

*"No, nothing... OK, if not them, why intelligence services? Why not diplomats? Don't they want to?"*

*"Oh sure they do, but who's gonna let them," Dmytro Ivanovich muttered. "It just happened that it's the military's domain, historically."*

*"We're sibling departments anyway," Aksat Dzhonatanovich added. "We're not starting a war with lizards that can't even go to space. If that's what you're asking about."*

*"The Fist claims it's their diplomats who are handling the lizards," the redhead noted.*

*"Oh, we can also claim whatever we want," Aksat Dzhonatanovich chuckled. "In actuality, everybody's gonna send agents anyway."*

*"What did you need these shots for?" the redhead changed the topic.*

*"To rattle like lizards," Grip spilled the beans at last.*

*“O-oh,”* the redhead intoned with respect.

Aksat Dzhonatanovich, on the other hand, was left displeased, or at least pretended to.

*“Should’ve told us right away what you’re after,”* he said in a stern voice. *“Maybe we could’ve come up with something better. And now it’s probably too late...”*

Zulfiia Solkovna entered the room, waited for him to finish the phrase, pinned Grip in place with her eyes and commanded jokingly:

*“Everybody out, boys!”*

The three men begrudgingly followed her order.

Grip knew her, he talked to her twice to date. Once when his dad was taken, and once again, a week later. Maria Stepanovna asked him to stay after class, then Zulfiia Solkovna came in, and they discussed some rather abstract topics. First time they’ve constructed different scenarios in order to discuss what was or was not just. The scenarios have invariably converged at a conclusion that one must first determine who’s in charge and then aid them. The second time it seemed like she was trying to determine which careers Grip was predisposed to. Grip has gladly partaken in the discussions about different kinds of jobs, but what was the goal, if any, was a mystery to him. Both times she has divulged nothing specific about the topic that mattered — his father. And both times Grip came back home to unmistakable signs of searches, so, maybe what they have talked about wasn’t important after all.

The third time has carried on the legacy of the first two when it comes to awkwardness. Zulfia Solkovna tried to behave like an old acquaintance of his, but something was off. They didn't beat around the bush for too long:

*"Say, Grip, what do you think about the Fist?"*

Grip hasn't really thought much about the Fist, he never saw any. He sifted through his memory and recalled a recent conversation with mom. Grip was insisting that if he were to invent a better excavator bucket, it'd be fair if everyone who benefitted from it paid him for that. Mom has convincingly countered that, at a timescale of a century, his bucket will help almost everyone in the universe, even if just a little. And thus, looking back a century, Grip will also end up indebted to pretty much everyone, so accounting for all of that is outright infeasible. Yeah, and along the way, she has mentioned in passing that fists have something like that, but even then it's not really like that. None of this has helped Grip answer the question, so the silence dragged on.

*"Uh... they're people, just like us. They live on their planets, we live on ours. Space is big, so we don't interfere with each other."*

*"That's right, but what's the difference then?"*

*"They don't believe in the common good,"* Grip remembered the official cliché.

Zulfia Solkovna was content with the correct answer, yet she also looked like she wanted for more. She also stopped her usual constant jotting down.

*"They have their own, different state, built differently. Ilya Ilyich Svobodin is not the head of them, they've got some other ones..."*  
The incessant jotting down has resumed.

*"The mission is going to take place at their base, did you know that?"*

*"Because they were the first to discover the lizards?"*

*"Yes. There is just one base there, their ship. Half of the personnel will be from the Fist, and so will be your partner. What do you think about that?"*

*"I don't know,"* Grip didn't have any reservations against the fists and didn't understand what was required from him. *"But we all want to be friends with the lizards, us and them alike."*

*"When this will be over, and you'll make friends with the lizards, would you like to go visit them?"*

*"Visit Fist?"* Grip felt the need to clarify.

*"Yes."*

*"I don't know. Probably yes. Should be... interesting."* Grip answered after a pause. *"Which language will we speak?"*

*"With fists?"* It was her turn to clarify now. *"English."*

And she went on to reassure:

*"You've been learning it for five years already, you'll manage just fine. If you don't understand something, just ask and they'll explain again. It's a joint mission after all."*

Grip wasn't that sure of his English skills. But then he remembered he's now an ambassador to lizards or something, so maybe this particular language barrier really isn't the top problem on his list.

*“A-and we’re done,”* Zulfia Solkovna finished checking all the checkmarks or whatever she was doing over there and stood up hastily. *“I won’t delay you any further.”*

For a split second Grip was sure that it wasn’t her, but someone else, her twin sister he never met before. But he couldn’t pinpoint why. She cheered him up with something vacuous, and opened the door to reveal Dmytro Ivanovich waiting outside. He entered the room, but showed no intention to settle here for long:

*“Let’s go get some food! We’ve got a plenty of time and I had no lunch yet. To the canteen!”*

Grip was all for it.

They went outside again, only to stop by the next door. Grip only got time to ask:

*“Is it a problem, working with the fists?”*

*“Depends. To me – yes, you don’t even imagine. To you – not at all, like I’ve said. Make friends with lizards first, deal with the fists later.”*

*“I’ll have to speak to the fists in English.”*

*“See, how convenient it is then,”* Derevyashko refused to acknowledge his concerns, *“that you happen to know it.”*

And dove into the canteen, putting this discussion to an end.

Grip was dazzled by all the bright food. Tens, if not hundreds of different dishes, unusually colourful, mostly unfamiliar. The other worries had to yield to choice paralysis, but, with Dmytro Ivanovich’s help, Grip settled on something only moderately cryptic. Derevyashko picked up not one, not two, but three

dishes, and they occupied a smaller table. Grip's food, especially the bright red thing, turned out more colourful than tasty, yet passable overall. When he was done with it, Dmytro Ivanovich was still mid-second dish.

*"Does Zulfia Solkovna have a sister?"*

*"Huh?"* Derevyashko uttered nonchalantly.

*"What is she doing here?"*

*"Gauging your psychological fitness for the job. It's nothing to worry about, just a standard procedure, every agent undergoes that."*

Grip squinted at him:

*"Every one of your agents gets interviewed by our school's psychologist?"*

*"Ah,"* Dmytro Ivanovich understood the question, but was in no rush to explain anything. He first weighted some pros and cons, and only then lowered his voice: *"Some people, Grip, usually outstanding experts in their fields... They're allowed to live on several planets at once."*

*"At once? Like, copied?"*

Derevyashko raised an eyebrow:

*"How do you think you came here?"*

Grip didn't answer.

*"So we scanned you there and printed you here. You were erased over there though, and they were let to live. But only on different planets."*

*"Only on different?.. Can't we just make copies of them right here?"*

*"Of course we can, technically," Dmytro Ivanovich smiled. "Except, uh, how does one put it... People, almost all of them are... at odds with themselves, you know? It's better if they never meet."*

*"I get it," Grip smiled back. "I'd also rather not... But why destroy me?"*

Derevyashko didn't get the question, yet proceeded with his prepared reply nonetheless:

*"First, that requires a permit... Uhh... What for?"*

*"So that it's easier for mom."*

*"Ah," Derevyashko understood but disagreed. "That way we, uh, gonna face a big problem, Grip. An ethical one."*

*"Ethical?"*

*"Moral. You see, if both of you get to live separate lives, you become different people, and then it's gonna be murder. Picture that: they talk, they walk, they make memories together, he goes to school... And then what? You come back, with no memories of those walks and studies, and we kill the other you? That's inhumane."*

*"So let him live, and kill this me instead."*

*"Oh bother," Derevyashko gasped. "That's even better. So, you work hard, you establish relationships, you return a hero, an invaluable expert with a lizard on your shoulder... And then what? We fend off the journalists, bring you to a dark corner, award and kill you? Just brilliant. I've got an even better idea: let's rather stick to not killing anyone, OK?"*

*"So, the way it is now is not killing anyone?"*



*"Who said that? Or, here you are, alive and well," Dmytro Ivanovich parried with conviction.*

*"And you claim you've erased me there, and I'm the only one?"*

*"Just as I've said, yes. There's no second you. People don't get duplicated left and right, Grip, not without a permit, pre-agreement and all that headache. There have to be some solid reasons."*

*"As you say," Grip worked at concealing his disbelief. "Can we have a secret phrase? One I can send, so that you know it's time to save me?"*

*"Sure," Derevyashko agreed readily. "Like what?"*

*"Blue snow'," Grip suggested.*

*"Well, if you want to, but shouldn't it be inconspicuous? Something you can easily work into a report."*

*"Alright, then..." Grip thought for a while. "I miss ice cream".*

*"Deal. Try not to write that on accident though. I see it, I hop over to save you, or send someone better."*

*"Good. Where's the restroom?"*

After washing his hands, Grip has examined himself in a mirror. The reflection was clearly of him wearing his ordinary clothes. A copy of the clothes. A copy of him. Still, the oddest thing was the low gravity.

Derevyashko was done with his meal.

*"We still got a couple of hours to spare, what are we gonna do? We can walk along the river, fly in a park..."*

*"No idea," Grip insisted. "Zero. It's my first day here, and I know*

*absolutely nothing."*

*"Let's have a ride then, if Mit'ka lends you a board."*

This time they went to an almost normal apartment block. That Mit'ka boy handed them a board without saying a word, and they set off to a park.

*"Just after you've strengthened your bones! But anyway, try not to fall!"* Dmytro Ivanovich admonished him. *"Gonna turn on educational mode", "don't fly high", "if you fall, aim for the snow"* and *"try to avoid flying into anyone"* bombarded Grip, as he tried to take all of them into account at once.

Standing on a board turned out to be the easy part. It didn't fly higher than a meter, and neither did it accelerate too fast. Turning was simple and intuitive; the bit that required practice was not moving in all directions at once. But that was manageable as well, so Grip has almost figured it out. He even flew around the park without falling or hitting anyone, ending up expectedly pleased. After checking his watch yet another time, Derevyashko hurried up. They returned the board and headed for the Palace of Reconnaissance, happy and red-cheeked.

The Palace of Reconnaissance turned out to be a real place, and quite some grandiose marble place it was. It stood high like the Rosario administration, its steep steps partly occupied by the kids. A group of teens was singing, three younger kids were repairing a board. The entrance was branded with a face of Ilya Ilyich Svobodin, his side-view being easily thrice the Grip's height. They entered a huge hall with sky-high ceilings, and

joined Aksat Dzhonatanovich on a bench nearby. The hall was mostly empty, but lively; people walked past, chatted on the benches.

Derevyashko was looking straight ahead, waiting for something. Then checked his watch again, muttered “*Where are they?*”, and the very same second two people entered the hall from the opposite side, and adult and a kid with two short pigtails. They kept holding hands for several more steps, but then the kid broke free and sprang into a frontal assault, each giant leap modulating her war cry:

“*De-rev-ya-a-a-a-shka-a-a-a!*”

Derevyashko sprang up, extended his hands in a greeting and commenced an interception manoeuvre to the following commentary from Aksat Dzhonatanovich:

“*No, no, no, no... o-of*”.

Dmytro Ivanovich caught and lifted the girl off the ground:

“*Thal’ka! You parasite! Look how you’ve grown up! Last time you were what, half the size, and babbling something about diplomatic immunity...*”

That greeting made the girl shift into reverse and signal to lower her down, yet her squealing stayed friendly and cheerful:

“*How are you, how’s Maksimka doing?*”

“*Awesome, wonderful! How are you?*”

Grip stood up and approached the scene; Aksat Dzhonatanovich followed and began the introductions:

“*So, here we have Martin Aleksandrovich Voronov, a defector.*”

The girl's companion looked Grip in the eyes and nodded from afar.

*"And this is Thalia, your partner, an excellent agent. Good acquaintance of Derevyashko since the times he was catching her."*

*"And caught her twice!"* Derevyashko added, well-pleased. *"Once in the archive, and then once again in the council's office."*

*"Thalia, this is Grip, your partner."*

Skinny, loose-limbed, energetic Thalia calmed down a little to inspect Grip.

*"Where are you from?"*

*"Rosario."*

*"Ever been to Kronnitsa?"*

*"Nope,"* Grip replied. *"Only to Rosario and, since today, here."*

*"Are you good at lizard?"* she kept on interrogating him.

*"People keep telling me I'm good at writing, but I'd rather wait and see what lizards think about it."*

Thalia's attention got diverted to Derevyashko. Grip also looked at him. Dmytro Ivanovich shamelessly enjoyed the show.

*"Lieutenant! Pitting a valenok<sup>2</sup> against me? Are you serious?"*

*"Thalia!"* Derevyashko, smiling wide, pretended to be offended.

*"First of all, it's valenok, the stress falls on the first syllable. Second, if you know about my son, you know about the promotion as well. Third, it's impolite, for he's no felt boot, he's your partner! And, finally, he's your partner. Sort it out yourself."*

---

<sup>2</sup>A soft felt boot. Not a compliment.

Thalia looked humiliated, working on suppressing her emotions. Aksat Dzhonatanovich stepped forward, but she stopped him with a glance, breathed in, breathed out and stretched her hand out:

*“Listen, let’s start anew. We were off to a bad start. Helga Thalia Voronov. Friends call me Thalia.”*

Grip shook her hand eagerly and smiled:

*“And I’m Grip Avdotievich Stavropolskiy. Friends can call me ‘valenok’.”*

Thalia has twitched a little. Grip interpreted that as a suppressed attempt to hit him with her left hand. Aksat Dzhonatanovich groaned disapprovingly, Derevyashko was having fun, Thalia’s father observed the fuss condescendingly, as if the drama was unfolding in a sandbox. And there was some woman with a tablet approaching them. She noticed Grip looking at her, stopped right where she was and loudly proclaimed:

*“Grip Stavropolskiy, Helga Voronov, follow me to the press room!”*

*“Bummer,”* Dmytro Ivanovich uttered. He saw Grip’s questioning look and elaborated: *“That means we’re not hearing anything useful here. Only there.”*

Aksat Dzhonatanovich quietly, yet legibly remarked, addressing no one in particular:

*“Look at the bright side. At least she won’t leech our blood over here.”*

Thalia was striding away; Grip tried to catch up and almost succeeded. The press room could fit, like, three hundred people,

but there were just three: two with mics and a woman with a tablet. She escorted them to the centre and said:

*“Go ahead.”*

*“Where to?”* Grip asked.

*“Tell us about your mission,”* one of the journalists stretched his mic towards him.

Grip hesitated. Thalia looked at Grip expectantly.

*“We’re heading to Epsilon Indi 3,”* Grip began slowly, *“to the first extraterrestrial intelligence we’ve ever met. We’re excited that humans are not alone in the universe. Lizards and us have much to learn about each other, and I hope we’ll make good friends with them... our kids– us, with them.”*

*“We are honoured to represent the humanity,”* Thalia picked it up confidently, *“in such an important intercivilizational mission. And we are confident that it will mark a new beginning of a wonderful intercultural collaboration.”*

The journalists, satisfied with what they heard, roamed away. Thalia made a beeline to the exit, Grip followed her:

*“And why are you so sure everything will be wonderful?”*

*“Cause otherwise they won’t release this video,”* Thalia brushed him off.

*“Huh.”*

Their escort was waiting in the hall, but the woman with a tablet displayed no intentions of stopping and headed left to some hallway:

*“This way, agents.”*

Thalia waved at her dad, Derevyashko waved at her, in the end everyone waved at everyone else and the kids disappeared into the hallway. From there they turned left into a room with multiple stalls. The tablet woman sent Grip into one of them, and, half a minute later, a large guy in white joined him.

*"Just arrived, huh?"*

*"Uh-huh."*

*"Just look at what they're doing, huh. No shame, no conscience."*

The man looked Grip into the eye, whipped out a syringe.

*"Any last instructions?"*

*"No,"* Grip hesitated nervously.

*"Wishes?"*

*"No."*

The man lowered the hand back.

*"Hey, is everything alright?"*

*"Physically? Yeah, I'm fine."*

*"Well, that's the only thing that matters to me,"* the man said with a smile, as he performed an injection.





# **(Not) understood**

As something large began unsticking from his back, Grip convulsed involuntarily and went awake for a second. He was being carried somewhere, and, once put down, fell back into deep sleep.

Next time Grip woke up much later, well-rested, on a bed that was both too large and too tall for him. The air was so hot, the thin suit was a life-saver. A night stand offered two shot glasses, a phone and a hooded suit. Grip reached for the phone; there were no news altogether. The contact list had the following people active:

- Daniel Washington
- Helga Voronov
- Irakli Kosmovich Shpreigl
- Lee Cheng
- Lisa Frei
- Maria Stinner

- Stalina Filantievna Ivanova

The room was less of a room and more of a flimsy, hastily assembled section in a hangar of sorts. The door was outright missing from the door frame. Nobody lined up to drag Grip through another hazy montage of places to be, things to ponder and people to forget. Not in the room, not behind the corner. Grip ventured further, and, a turn later, got spotted by a burly woman carrying a long pole.

*“Grip! Good morning, how was your sleep?”*

*“Great, thank you.”*

His head didn’t hurt this time, and the Arkadian lightness went away, something he only noticed just now. The woman briefly toyed with her phone. A brief quiet symphony of noises spread around the hangar, someone stood up nearby.

*“General assembly?”*

*“Uh-huh. Let’s lug that thing over there, then we’ll go meet the others.”*

Grip grabbed the rear end of pole, and they carried it through the hallway into a mostly empty section. It didn’t look like his assistance was particularly useful.

*“I’m Stalina Filantievna, I—, well, housekeeping’s on me. If you need something, personal or for work, that’d be my duty to help. Halt— put it here and let’s go to the canteen.”*

The station looked like it was undergoing some renovations

and repartitioning. Half of the sections were empty, some were packed with who-knows-what. Stalina Filantievna picked up a display on their way, and placed it on a large table in the canteen. Grip wouldn't call that room a "canteen", by the way: a canteen is supposed to have trays, racks and tables, not armchairs and a sofa. But "kitchen" suited it even worse, as kitchen is where people cook.

Stalina Filantievna poured him a glass of water, while explaining what sort of food do they have and where the showers and restrooms are. Grip took a quick peek, and the facilities sure didn't live up to his space tech expectations. If anything, they were something in between the ones at home and the ones at school.

By the time he returned, the canteen was much more agitated. The large sofa gained two young ladies; Thalia stormed in, stomping loudly, greeted everyone and jumped into one of the armchairs. The last one to enter the room was a man of a ripe... well, an old man. And the screen now featured two guys sitting next to each other.

"Welcome our new contact group, Thalia and *Grip*!" Stalina Filantievna began.

"Hello! Have fun down there!" one of the guys greeted them warmly. "I'm Dan, and it sure is boring up here."

"Our communications genius," the old man remarked quietly. Grip tilted his head back at him.

"And this is Lee," Stalina Filantievna continued. "His area of

expertise is flying. And everything power now.”

“Hi,” Lee greeted them in Russian for some reason. He was rather... reserved? Humble?

“You’re an astrophysicist, aren’t you, Lisa?”

“At least that’s what my diplomas say. Long story,” the black-haired lady smiled back.

“Maria is our resident biologist—”

“That’s right, all about the local lifeforms,” the other one nodded.

“And last, but not least, *Irakli Kosmovich*,” Stalina Filantievna gestured towards the old man. “Our expert on languages, dead or alive.”

“Mostly the dead ones,” Irakli Kosmovich concluded after some contemplation.

“Thalia’s one famous spy—”

“Not by a conventional definition—,” Thalia began to argue.

“—and *Grip* translated that tale about a hen...”

“Nice to meet you,” Grip greeted his smiling colleagues.

“I still don’t get it, by the way,” Maria admitted.

“It’s OK, don’t sweat it,” Stalina Filantievna reassured her.

“Good job with the translation,” Irakli Kosmovich praised Grip.

“What happened to the previous contact group?” Thalia asked.

“Straight to the point. I like her,” Dan pointed at her.

“We, uh, messed up,” Maria picked the words carefully. “Chances are, lizards don’t want to talk to us any more.”

“Off to a great start, aren’t we,” Thalia rolled her eyes. “How bad is the situation?”

“At one point they went as far as to state ‘you’re here, we don’t

talk, you're not here'," Irakli Kosmovich slowly quoted. "The exact meaning of that is, of course, up to interpretation, but it's not that hard to arrive at one where they no longer want to talk to us and would rather prefer us to leave."

"Now you're just being dramatic," Stalina Filantievna shook her head. "Right after that they were reminded they've agreed to grade the essays, and they had no problem doing that. Maybe they liked yours so much, or maybe they forgot what they've said before, but they've subsequently agreed to meet with a new group in the end."

"New of ours speak to new of yours, new of yours speak to new of ours'" Irakli Kosmovich proclaimed monotonously. "Again, we're not really sure 'new' means 'younglings' and not just 'new faces', but we've decided to seize the opportunity and phase out most of the crew—

"To give them some rest, long overdue," Lisa interjected.

"—and try to reignite the lizards' interest with an all-new contact group of kids."

"We already went without contact for one evening," Maria said in a worrying tone.

Grip lost count of all the new English words they used, but, somehow, the general meaning still was unambiguous and easy to infer.

"What did we do wrong the last time?" Grip asked.

"We're not supposed to tell you," Irakli Kosmovich said slowly.

"We want a fresh start, and we don't want you to inadvertently

fall into the same rut.”

“But if we don’t know what offended them the last time, how... do we know what topic to avoid?” Grip insisted.

The adults in the room exchanged quick glances, but the guys from above might’ve missed that altogether.

“Well, that’s an easy one: technology,” Dan answered. “Our lil’ friends are afraid of our machines. Or, at least, very suspicious of them. Not entirely surprising, given they have none of their own—”

“We’re not sure about that,” Lee interrupted him.

“We, uh, true, they’re quite secretive when the discussion comes to them, but it’s been almost two years and not a single thing suggests they do.” Dan clarified. “At this point, I’d be surprised if it turns out they do use tools after all, and it’s safe to assume they’ve got no spaceships. And no computers. They don’t understand this stuff, and they’re scared of it. And I can’t blame them, prehistoric humans would be scared as well. So, fellas, think twice before showing them... pretty much everything, they might not like it.”

“Good point. Since we’re having a fresh start, ask for their explicit approval before bringing anything,” Stalina Filantievna agreed with him.

“They call tech ‘complex objects’,” Irakli added.

“So, what’s our goal?” Thalia asked.

“Well, for starters, secure yourselves a second conversation,” Irakli Kosmovich stretched out the words. “The rest can wait.”

“Splendid,” Thalia replied dryly. “That’s not helping.”

“Do you have any other advice?” Grip attempted a more constructive approach.

A second round of exchanging glances ensued. Oblivious to the tension, Dan defused it once again:

“Don’t step on any.”

“Yeah, that sounds like a bad start of a diplomatic mission,” Grip concluded with a straight face once the laughter subsided.

“How have we met? Originally? And how do we meet now?” Thalia inquired.

This story was also supposed to be secret, but, at the same time, too good not to share, so the adults all jumped at the opportunity to retell it.

Epsilon Indi explorers landed on the third planet, because it had life and life is always interesting. Johnny was a geologist (and the life of the party, judging by how warmly he was remembered). One day, when he needed to measure one more thing, he did everything by the book: ventured out for 750 meters almost straight ahead, and placed a probe. The next day, when he returned to pick it up, he saw a lizard observe him calmly instead of immediately running away. Johnny observed it back, extracted the probe, and almost went back, when he noticed an isosceles right triangle drawn in the sand next to the lizard. So, Johnny being Johnny, he drew two more under the first one, and gasped, as the lizard merrily drew three more. Johnny then proceeded to act naturally, i.e., dropped the probe and ran for the ship, while flailing his arms and being generally

inarticulate on how exactly are lizards talking to him through straight triangles. The rest of the crew acted naturally as well, i.e, apprehended and sedated him as soon as he left the airlock, then started arranging his early return. But the next day Johnny kept sticking to his story, insisting he doesn't want to go back home, but rather back to the desert. When he was escorted there, they found not just the probe, but also two lizards plus the writing on the sand later translated as "we are here". One of the lizards was running around, while the second one made "hurr-durr"-like sounds. And that's how people and lizards established a meeting place. For a while people went there in planet suits; later they've built an entire meeting dome, one that Grip and Thalia would use now for their diplomatic activities.

"All right, but before I show you your workplace and let you roam around the base freely: safety training. Safety first!"

Thalia and Grip followed Stalina Filantievna along the broad hallway dividing the base into Fist and Federation halves. At the centre of the base this hallway widened even further, encircling two untidy boxes with wires growing on them in thick bunches and leading to some racks further down the hall. These turned out to be teleports that Thalia and Grip had arrived through.

The hangar they were in was a ship no longer fit for flight, and, in case of an emergency, they were supposed to use pods, not teleports. Two pods, each able to seat ten, were always ready to bring them to the Fed ship at the orbit, and, from there, they could be teleported back home in peace. Formally, one was a



Fed pod and another one was a Fist pod, but they should've just run for whichever one was the closest.

Stalina Filantievna led them to the first pod, showed them a large red button and pressed a different, smaller one. The screens lit up to show Dan and Lee:

“Long time no see!” Dan greeted them. “The only thing you need to remember is that red button. There’s another one, go find it!”

The second pod across the base was a mirror image of the first one.

“And here’s the second one, yeah. When something bad happens, press the red button, and I’ll pull you up here. Be careful though, and I hope you’ll never use this knowledge,” Lee summed it up.

“Got any more questions?” Stalina Filantievna asked once she made sure they both remembered what to do.

“What else do people have? On this planet?”

(Stalina was irritated at how those kids ask questions. But if she thought it was yet another fad she can’t keep up with — distorting the language outside the confines of tightly regulated grammar and phonetics — she couldn’t be more wrong. The question intonation swings actually affected all ages alike — it was lizard, even when studied in its written form exclusively, that left this specific mark on how its practitioners spoke. Time and time again, the intonation peak crept earlier and earlier, occasionally missing the logic of either language; then came multi-peaking, and, finally, breaking sentences up. Most of the

affected didn't pay enough attention to this impact of lizard on humans'.)

"Let me see," Stalina Filantievna frowned. "Not much, really. The ship, the pods, the solar panels— two ships: this ship, the ship in the orbit, and a small comms satellite. And the dome. I bet you want to see the dome."

Thalia stormed off to pick up her planet suit, Grip had to be led to his room.

They reunited at the airlock, where Stalina lapsed into yet another lecture on safety. Turned out, the local air she characterized as "sorta wretched, even the lizards prefer ours" was deceptively safe. That made the smell useful, as one would instantly know they're breathing wrong air. It wasn't immediately deadly or anything: in the absence of any better options, humans could survive for up to half an hour on local air alone, especially if they were to minimize their physical activity. In case of an emergency, running back to the ship without a suit wasn't off the table. Even though, officially, it violated the safety protocols, under which they were supposed to wear "these fine soft suits of yours, no longer featuring all the imaginable state-of-the-art technology we had to painstakingly strip to, you know, put the lizards at ease". After learning how to insert the air tabs, they've put the planet suits on. It soon became obvious why they couldn't learn all of that on the go: sealed up correctly, the hood-helmet did an excellent job of dampening their voices. Without the comms in their suits, talking was an exhausting

activity for everyone involved: one would need to shout, and the others would still have to stop moving and focus on listening.

Once they got over the shouting part, Stalina Filantievna opened the hatch at last. It was really hot out there. An endless desert stretched around them, with only a couple of cacti on the horizon, here and there. And a transparent dome in front of them, looking blatantly out of place. Stalina Filantievna gave them time to look around, then invited them to follow her with a gesture. They walked towards the dome in silence. Approximately a hundred meters in diameter, the dome loomed impractically large and suspiciously empty. Up close, it looked even more transparent than regular glass. Grip's gaze bounced between the dome and the sand beneath his feet, as if he was comparing them.

They've entered the already open airlock: a small bubble stuck to a large bubble. Stalina Filantievna pressed a button, which, unexpectedly, was a single one for both doors: the outer one fizzed, hissed and rustled close, in sync with the inner one opening up. She removed the hood without waiting for the switch to complete; the kids followed her example.

"That's how the local air tastes like, take a whiff. So, this is what I meant by 'handy', with a smell like that, you won't miss a suit malfunction."

The local air was, indeed, unpleasant, slightly bitter and not deadly. It was already yielding to the air that was much more familiar, but served way over the comfortable temperature.

Were they to wander the local desert, the heat would likely pose a more immediate problem than the air.

“It’s hot in here!”

Thalia nodded in agreement enthusiastically.

“It’s not that bad,” Stalina Filantievna replied disapprovingly, “it’s just a seven-hundred-meter walk, and then you can take off your planet suits. Mind that you’ll be meeting at sunset, when it’s gonna be much cooler. This,” she gestured vaguely towards the sun, “This is too hot for the lizards themselves.”

From the inside, the dome looked even larger and emptier. The closer half featured a glass floor, the further half was sand. The airlock for lizards was on the other side, and looked, like, five times smaller. On the left, there was a stool with a water tank on it and... that was it. Nothing else in the entire giant dome.

“So, here’s your workplace!”

Grip was disappointed, looking around for more. He wandered around, as if somebody invited him over but moved out, and now Grip’s hoping for the hosts to show up and explain themselves. Thalia, disappointed over a multitude of other reasons, questioned Stalina Filantievna:

“What do we do? If something happens to us here?”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know, anything! What if a lizard bit us? Say...”

“I’m not sure they– uh, anyway, if something threatens your safety, just put on your suits and run for the ship.”

“But what if my suit gets broken?”

“Send *Grip* back for help.”

“What if both our suits get broken? Then what?”

“... in that unlikely case, either walk back without the suits, or, if it's safer to stay here, just stay here, and we'll come pick you up, eventually.”

“Look, I'm just saying I'd like it much more if we had radios or something.”

“And I'm saying it's not a walk in the park, young lady. You're on a mission. On a frontier planet. And as far as space exploration goes, a very safe one,” Stalina answered coldly. “I don't think you two are gonna die out here, not unless you put some actual effort into it.”

“Can you make us hats? From the same material?” Grip asked, fiddling with a hood of the planet suit. “I don't know what the evenings are like here, and I'm worried about the heat... If we need to stay here for long. And it sounds like we'll have to.”

“... Yeah, your clothes could use some hood. We'll see. I'll print you two some caps or something.”

They walked around aimlessly, for there was nothing to look at.

“Is there anything else here? Except the water and the chair?”

“The air tube.”

Stalina Filantievna led them back to the airlock. The wall next to it featured a hole and a tube, softly blowing in relatively cold air.

“Anything else?”

“No, not really. Whatever stuff we had here, we've moved it back to the base. Tell me if you need something, and I'll print it.”

As excitement yielded to nervousness, the base started looking like a backside of a yawn-inducing dark brown barn, with only a small entrance in the middle. Stalina showed them the button to open the hatch; they've left the planet suits at the bay. Grip asked to show him the way to Irakli Kosmovich, while Thalia went some place else.

The old man sat at a desk full of papers, with papers in one hand, reading a paper from the other hand. He turned to the visitors and back to put all the papers into the right stacks:

*"Hello, hello, Grip. I was told to tutor you for a while. And I'm no teacher, not at all, so I'd like to apologize in advance for that. I'll do my best."*

*"Uh, hello. Please, teach me to talk with the lizards."*

*"Me? Na-ah."*

Grip didn't expect that.

*"What do you mean? I need—"*

*"You'll be the one teaching me their language. It'd be all wrong, see, if you're the one talking to them first-hand, who am I to teach it to you?"*

*"But, wait, you sure know it better!"*

*"Yeah, maybe,"* – his teacher smirked. *"But for how long? And modes— Oh, let's test you,"* Irakli Kosmovich picked up a blank sheet from the blank stack: *"Go ahead, write down: 'I'm here'."*

Grip took the mechanical pencil and wrote<sup>3</sup>, left-to-right:

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<sup>3</sup>from here on, the disjunct notation and vocabulary mirror those of the Federal

“[exist] [here-in] [I]”

“*Tired... we’re coming to you.*”

Grip jotted below:

“[we] [be-tired] [go] [yous’]”.

“*See, you already have something to talk about.*”

“*I can’t talk, only write.*”

“*Heh, well, who can? But you can write.*”

“*On the sand?*”

“*Yeah, right. You write to them, they write back at you.*”

“*... I should give it a try.*”

“*Sure, go ahead, if you want to. But first, translate this one...*”

Irakli Kosmovich wrote down another line:

“[I] [be-proper-?]”

Grip started scribbling “*Am I*”, then proceeded with “*proper?*”:

“*This one used to be translated as ‘good’, but now it’s ‘proper’,*” he commented.

“*Correct,*” Irakli Kosmovich nodded in approval, “*We’ve realized ‘good’ doesn’t suit– Boy, you really are more fluent when writing in their language than in your native one! OK, eh, you know what, I suppose you have more than enough on your plate for the first days. I’ll report that you’re studying Russian for the first couple of days, and you can just practice some handwriting. I do hope you’ll be taking notes out there.*”

“*Guess I’ll need a simpler pencil,*” Grip said, examining the writing implement once he was done with the word.

*"I don't... Nah, you know better. That's fine, they like simpler things,"* Irakli Kosmovich changed his mind mid-sentence.  
*"Give me this one back then."*

*"So, what will you be teaching me, languages? Linguistics?"*

*"No, the other way around, no languages. You can practice English with Thalia, lizard – with lizards."*

Grip frowned, but didn't argue.

*"I'll be tutoring you on the other subjects: maths, history, whatever else you have these days. As I said, I'm no teacher, so I'll do my best. Classes, eh? Now go do something less boring."*

Grip found his room all by himself. He decided to order a plasticless, solid graphite pencil, noticed a missed text from Thalia: *"come here, we need to talk"*, admitted that he doesn't know where, and, in the end, she paid him a visit.

*"We need a plan–,"* she began upfront.

*"No."*

She raised an eyebrow back at Grip, sat on the other side of the bed:

*"Uh, what's your problem?"*

*"My problem is, you're an agent."*

*"... and you?"*

*"And I'm a valenok, remember?"*

*"That remains to be seen,"* she commented offhandedly.

Grip threw up his hands instead of answering.

*"Anyway, what was the problem again?"*

*"If lizards really wanted to talk with our kids, I don't think they*



*meant ‘send in your little spies.’”*

*“I’m not a spy. I’m an agent and a diplomat.”*

*“‘your little agents and diplomats’. Better?”*

*“So? What are you proposing? Send in some unprepared kids instead of diplomats?”*

Grip waved his hand, at loss for words.

*“That’s a recipe for... calamity,” she continued.*

Her Russian was good, but not ideal.

*“I kinda hope they understand that! And take into account that we’re just kids. Somehow. But here’s you.”*

*“I disagree, but I think I understand what you’re talking about...”*

*“Alright, and what do you propose?”* Thalia broke the silence.

*“I don’t know,” Grip replied. “Can you just act? ... like a normal kid?”*

*“You bet,”* said the spy caught twice while pretending to be a normal kid.

*“Yeah, right.”*

*“And you?”*

*“Me? I am a normal kid!”*

Thalia took offence at that.

*“And so am I,”* she replied after a while, *“I’m not some kid-shaped monster. I’ve got parents, friends, hobbies...”*

*“Like what?”* Grip tried to defuse it.

*“I play soccer... when I’ve got a place to play,”* Thalia got shy out of nowhere. *“But usually I don’t, so I solve crosswords.”*

The silence grew to awkward lengths.

*“Whatever,”* Thalia agreed out of nowhere. *“So be it. It’s not like*

*I know what am I doing anyway."*  
She moved back to slump against the wall.  
*"I don't know what they need,"* she continued. *"And I don't know what we can offer. These talks are gonna go just great."*  
*"I don't even know how do we talk,"* Grip contributed to the list.  
*"Write in the sand?"* Thalia wondered.  
*"I guess? Should we practice that beforehand?..."*  
*"Cool. I'm all for it,"* Thalia hopped down already. *"Let's find Stalina".*

Thalia led Grip to the teleports. Stalina Filantievna waited in front of one. Once she noticed the kids, she fished two thin soft hats out of her numerous pockets:  
*"Your pencil isn't ready yet. And neither is your stuff."*  
*"We wanna go outside again,"* Thalia proclaimed.  
*"I want to practice writing in the sand,"* Grip clarified after giving up on figuring out which language to speak and with whom.  
Stalina Filantievna didn't expect that, but had no objections.

*"Could you print us a ball?"* Thalia asked along the way.  
*"What, a ball? What for?"*  
*"To play soccer!"*  
*"Nonsense! This is a research station, young lady, not a soccer field."*  
*"We can play outside,"* Thalia kept pressing.  
*"Oh, cosmos!"* Stalina Filantievna protested with extra vigor.  
*"When I said you're unlikely to die outside, I meant, from walking to the dome and back. Not that you should go play*

soccer! This isn't your backyard!"

This time it was Thalia who opened the hatch. It was cooler, but still hot. The sun wasn't touching the horizon yet, but it was close. And, next to it, there was a moving dark patch.

"Look!" Grip shouted and extended the hand to cover the sun. It's unlikely that his companions made out the word, yet they also looked the same direction. A patch was swarming closer, and it became clear in a minute that it's made of lizards. At any given moment, part of them were running, and part of them were standing, alternating between the states all the time. Focusing at individual lizards evoked a mesmerizing impression of orderly movement, but the swarm as a whole roamed chaotically and unsteadily. It was coming closer at first, aiming more for the dome than for the ship, before taking a hard turn all of a sudden, passing behind the dome and heading somewhere else entirely.

Grip snapped out of it, remembered what he was after, and started writing in the hot sand:

"[I] [show] [signs']".

It came out really large, so he then tried to write as densely as he could:

"[I] [see] [you']".

Dry sand didn't lend itself to compact writing at all. Thalia watched that from the above, then also sat down to write:

"[I] [show] [signs']".

Unsure of what to do next, they stood in silence for a while before returning to the ship.

“We should get ready,” Thalia said nervously. “We must be there by sunset.”

Grip picked up his pencil, grabbed a sheet of paper, then waited at the bay for Thalia, who returned composed and expressly serious. The sun almost touched the horizon as they headed out again and walked to the dome in silence. The paper and pencil were left at the airlock, just in case, and so were the planet suits.

They walked to the centre of the dome and sat down where the glass gave way to the sand. After settling down for a bit, Grip squinted at the small airlock in front of them, and noticed a lizard in it! It was lying across, motionless, making no attempts to open the inner door.

“*You see that? A lizard!*” Thalia whispered.

“Yes,” Grip whispered back.

“*What do we do? Should we let it in?*”

“*No! Wait.*”

Thalia squirmed impatiently on the hot glass, Grip tried to move slower. The lizard seemed perfectly comfortable with the stand-still that showed no sign of resolution.

“*Over there!*” Thalia accidentally elbowed Grip when pointing and shifted further to the right. “*Sorry. Do you see it!*”

Indeed! Breathless, Grip watched a much smaller lizard running towards the airlock. Running. Stopping. Running. Stopping almost there. Lurching again— and biting the large one behind its hindlegs??! The large one turned abruptly, sending a lot of sand flying into the air, and fled, while the smaller one

nosebumped the button and entered the dome. Thalia gave Grip a quick puzzled side-glance. His eyes were locked on the lizard. Here it comes. Stops. Looks around. Runs to the centre. Stops. Runs. Fifteen centimetres long? Twenty? No, at a closer look, more like twenty-five. Very much like the pictures—, no, the characteristic head is there, but it's built differently. Stops across Grip and Thalia, eyes them up and begins rattling and writing.

They froze, as the lizard crawled towards them, with its tail rustling through the sand to the beat of clicks and rattles, inscribing to the side of its path:

“[exist] [here-in] [I]”

Grip rode out the anxiety wave and began redrawing the column, Thalia followed suit, but slower:

“[exist] [here-in] [I]”

“[exist] [here-in] [I]”

The lizard examined their columns (what could it even see from the ground level?), ran to the side and resumed the examination from there. Then it started grunting, which bore no resemblance to rattling, with heavy breathing clearly visible. “Hurr-durr?” Yes, quite similar. The kids froze in place until it finished grunting and produced another column:

“[I] [be-new]”

Grip and Thalia copied that one as well, but the lizard walked unceremoniously across their inscriptions, turned back at them and wrote:

“[up] [go] [down’]  
|[down] [go] [up’]”

Its tail alternating left and right to write two columns at once was so mesmerizing, that Grip did not move an inch, until the lizard finished and turned to look at his hand. Only then he reached out slowly to his scribbles, erased them carefully and started drawing the very same

“[exist] [here-in] [I’]  
|[I] [be-new]”

all over again, but upside down. The lizard didn’t seem to mind his hands moving nearby, paying more attention to erasing than to writing.

Writing in joint, outwards and upside down was no simple task. Doing that for two columns at once was out of question, two hands or one hand. The column wasn’t even straight when he used one hand. Thalia hasn’t even attempted fixing her writing, waiting for the lizard’s verdict. It already assumed a position across them, tail to the side and ready to write. As Grip finished the second column, it walked towards his writing:

“[up] [go] [up’]  
|[down] [go] [down’]”

Grip sat straight, relieved. Thalia, on the other hand, watched closely, as the lizard ran to her side to write:

“[I] [want] [know’] [signs’] [yours-of]  
|[I] [want] [know’] [sounds’] [yours-of]”

Grip has slowly wiped a wide stretch in front of him; the lizard was as unfazed by his hands as the last time, changing position as it saw fit. Thalia rolled her eyes, as she understood what is he writing: “*I GREET*”, upside down. As Grip pronounced the word loudly, like Maria Stepanovna did, the lizard stopped to listen and raised its head just a little.

“[do-explain] | [aforementioned’]” it then wrote without walking, establishing that columns were meant to be read right to left. That also implied that Grip’s word was backwards from the lizard perspective, as writing, as opposed to reading, has to go left to right. Good for right-handers. Grip untilted his head and slowly replied towards the lizard’s current position, column by column:

“[I] [see] [you’] | [I] [show] [aforementioned’]”

“[signs] [be-many] | [sounds] [be-many]” it complained.

“*Well, duh,*” Thalia uttered, stretched out to the centre and wrote “HI”.

Upside down and right to left, so, still backwards. She then pronounced it three times, pointing at the letters with every repetition.

“[do-explain] | [aforementioned’]” the lizard waved its tail towards the already written request.

“[I] [see] [you’] | [I] [show] [aforementioned’]” Thalia rested her finger on another pre-written phrase.

“[signs] [be-many-not]

|[sounds] [be-many-not]” it concluded at the sidelines.

“Let’s use English then,” Grip said with grave seriousness and

started erasing stuff, as he ran out of reachable space again.

“[yous] | [be-different-?]” the lizard asked in the meantime.  
It didn’t need to erase in advance.

“[we] [hold] [signs’] [be-different]  
| [we] [hold] [sounds’] [be-different]” Thalia wrote.

Whatever both sides had in mind was painfully ambiguous, yet the lizard looked content with the answer. Grip was worried though.

“[I] [want] [know’] [signs’] [yours-of]  
| [I] [want] [hold’] [signs’] [yours-of]”  
“[hold-?] | [signs’]” the lizard stood almost still, its tail swinging swiftly.

“[I] [hold] [object’] [signs-of]” Grip wrote down and ran out of glyphs to express the concept.

“[I] [understand-not] | [do-show] [aforementioned’]”  
Grip stood up slowly and fetched the paper together with the pencil.

“[do-see] [object’] | [aforementioned] [be-complex-?]” Grip wrote on the sheet of paper rested against the glass, then put it on the sand upside down.

The lizard inspected the paper for an inordinate amount of time, its eyes almost touching the symbols, checking it out from all possible directions.

“I don’t think it can—” Thalia started to whisper, interrupting the lizard’s examination.

It then ran to the side to reply:



“[aforementioned] [be-complex-not]

[aforementioned] [be-object-not]”

“[aforementioned] | [be-...-?]” Grip improvised, omitting the glyph itself and just prodding the empty space after the antestrokes.

“[aforementioned] | [be-substance]” the lizard “clarified”, leaving Thalia to squint and frown at the answer.

Grip handed the pencil for inspection to cover all the bases. The lizard has circled it, rolled it with its head, with its leg, dug below it...

“You think, it can see from below? Through the sand?”

“I doubt it.”

... and surfaced back, arriving at the same conclusion and pointing at it with its tail:

“[aforementioned] | [be-substance]”

“[yours] [eat-?] [animals’] | [ours] [eat] [animals’]”

“[true]” Grip wrote.

Coming from Rosario, he probably never ate animal meat, but the question was about the humans as a species.

Now yet another linguistic liberty dawned on him. He reached further into the lizard’s writing and erased the antestroke from [eat-?], turning it into a slightly messy [eat]. The lizard retreated, followed the finger, and, for a rather uncomfortable minute, kept staring at the “[yours] [eat] [animals’] | [ours] [eat] [animals’]”, now-ambiguous with regard to who [yours] and [ours] are. Grip, obviously, could not read emotions off its face.

It was getting dark. Finally, the lizard turned to them, raising no objections to the invasion of its writings.

“[yours] [hold] [animal’] | [animal] [hold-?] [food’]”

Grip turned to Thalia for support, she shook her head. She was the first to overcome the acute context deficit though:

“[exist] [be-many] [animals] [ours-of]” she wrote slowly, making

Grip doubt both her and his knowledge of the lizard language. After frantically waving his hands above it, with no obvious in-place fix in sight, he felt compelled to clarify in a separate column:

“[exist] [be-many] [categories’] [animals-of] [be-different]”

The lizard wanted to know more:

“[I] [want] [see’] [animals’] [yours-of]

| [you] [can-?] [show’] [animals’] [yours-of]”

“*Why is it so hard, huh?*” Grip grunted, replying:

“[I] [can] [show’] [signs’] [animals-of]”

The lizard looked at his belly. Puzzled? Waiting?

“[do-wait]” Grip wrote and turned to the paper.

Instead of waiting, the lizard climbed out onto the glass and watched him draw from approximately its length away. Grip sketched a lizard contour, examining a living reference from time to time. Thalia moved to observe it from the other side, fingers crossed for Grip’s scribbles to not become the final nail in the human-lizard relationships’ coffin. Slightly narrower here... tail... hindlegs... Once he finished and inched back, the lizard has nosebumped the result right here on the glass. Upon returning

to the sand it immediately stated:

“[?#1?] [be-sign-not] | [?#1?] [be-?#1?]”

Grip rushed to copy the new sign, Thalia hasn't commented at all and looked distanced.

*“Do you know what does this sign mean?”* Grip asked.

*“Could be ‘drawing’?”* she hasn't helped much.

“[I] [know-not] [sign'] [?#1?-of]

| [I] [can-?] [show'] [?#1?]"

Grip improvised in the dark again.

“[do-know] | [signs']” the lizard either encouraged or mocked him.

Grip stretched, looked towards the long-set sun and then decided to pursue the opportunity to [know] some more [signs']. There indeed were a couple of words he'd love to know.

“[do-wait]” he wrote before walking to the water keg.

There were no glasses, and he left the shots at the base, so he ended up carrying the almost hot water back in his cupped hand.

Once he placed it on top of his [do-wait] glyph, the lizard acted conflicted. After struggling with indecisiveness, it started rising and bending into his hand, all while trying to avoid touching Grip. He pressed the hand against the hot sand to help the lizard.

Finally, it touched the water, and Thalia started laughing quietly.

Grip smiled. The lizard kept poking the water with its mouth, but neither lapped nor swallowed it. Just probed the water again and again. Finally, it backed out, ran towards Thalia and wrote:

“[rejoicing] [you-of] [be-proper-not]"

Grip poured the water out, recapturing the entirety of the lizard's attention for another minute and giving Thalia ample time to explain herself:

“[rejoicing] [I-of] [be-different]

[exist] [head-in] [aforementioned’]”

“[can-not] [see’] | [head’] [you-of]” it answered once its fascination with wet sand wore off.

Grip didn't want a conflict, he wanted to [know] [signs’]:

“[I] [hold] [aforementioned’] | [do-show] [sign’] [aforementioned-of]”

“[exist-not] [aforementioned’] [ours-of] | [exist] [?#2?’] [ours-of]”

Grip grabbed the pencil again. The glyph got more complex, the night got darker. Thalia practiced writing the new sign upside-down, then extended it to:

“[do-explain] [?#2?’]”

“[can-not] [explain’] [?#2?’]”

*“Like, it's not just you who can't, but it's impossible? Come on. Think, lizard, think,”* Grip muttered.

“[we] [want] [know’] [?#2?’]” he pressured on.

The lizard looked at his knees and wrote nothing. Grip pointed at the last column again.

“[I] | [think]” the lizard brushed him off in writing and rattling.

The sounds obviously matched the writing, and, coupled with the tail movements, helped with the darkness greatly. If Grip got distracted back then and missed all the hints, he'd have to figure out the reply until the very dawn. Starting from where to find that reply.

“[I] [can] [see’] [be-less-er] [signs’] | [I] [can-not] [see’] [signs’]” he wrote with hesitation, out of column sync and unsure whether the sentence structure was legit.

“[I] [can] [see’] [signs’]” the lizard replied in one column.

*“I’m so happy for you,”* Grip vented.

“[I] [can-?] [hold’] [substance’]

| [substance] [hold] [here-in] [sun’]”

“[substance] [can-not] [be-sun’]

| [object] [aforementioned] [be-complex-?]”

“[substance] [hold] | [inside-in] [sun’]” Grip explained fluorescence the best he could.

“[aforementioned] [be-sun-?] | [aforementioned] [be-danger-?]”

“[substance] [be-sun-not] | [substance] [be-hot-not]”

“[be-sun-not] [can-not] [hold’] [sun’]

| [do-go] [do-hold] [here’] [aforementioned]”

“How to say ‘next time’?” Grip wondered aloud. “We’ve got no words for time.”

Thalia didn’t comment, but moved closer.

“[we] [go] [living place’] | [exist] [here-in-?] [you’]”

“[true-not]”

Thalia sprung into writing:

“[we] [go] [here’] | [you] [go-?] [here’]”

“[exist] [up-in] [sun’] [exist] [down-in] [sun’]

| [exist-not] [here-in] [I’] [exist] [here-in] [I’]

Thalia exhaled with great relief.

“[exist] [up-in] [sun’] [exist] [down-in] [sun’]

| [exist-not] [here-in] [we’] [exist] [here-in] [we’]”

Grip sealed the agreement.

“[do-go] [do-hold] [ʔ#1ʔsʰ] [animals-of] [be-small-er]  
|[do-go] [do-hold] [substanceʰ] [aforementioned] [be-sun]” the lizard instructed.

“[I] [go] [hold] [ʔ#1ʔsʰ] [animals-of]” Grip started reassuring, and came up with another idea:

“[I] [go] [hold] [substanceʰ]  
|[substance] [aforementioned] [help] [seeʰ]”

The lizard got tired of expressing its doubt in the magical properties of human materials. Thalia was puzzled as well:

“Wanna order him glasses?” she asked half-jokingly.

*“I want to bring a magnifying glass,”* Grip replied.

Thalia didn’t know the Russian word, Grip didn’t know the English one.

“[we] | [go]” he wrote and started standing up.

“[I] | [go]” the lizard wrote as well, then ran away with two short stops.

Quiet door hissing marked its exit.

*“We did it!”* Thalia stretched out in a tired voice.

*“Ye-ea-a-h,”* Grip mirrored her intonation.

*“You’re good with their language, for real.”*

*“It was hard.”*

*“Uh-huh. Couldn’t see a thing by the end.”*

Turned out, the ship featured three red lights, very handy when you’re aiming for the entrance after sunset. On their way back, Grip broke his stride several times when he saw a large lizard

nearby, but decided against telling Thalia. Stopping to point fingers and shout “look, a lizard” just felt like an impolite thing to do on a planet of lizards. In the airlock Thalia asked him:

*“Did you see them? Lizards on our way back...”*

*“Yes. They live here, actually.”*

Kids took off the planet suits and went to the buzzing canteen. The buzz stopped once they entered the scene, with Dan being the last to stop talking.

“How did it go? Took you a while,” Stalina Filantievna voiced it for everyone.

“There will be a second meeting,” Grip replied and the cheerful buzz resumed.

“It even drank from Grip’s hand!” Thalia squeaked merrily, further fueling the cheering.

“Are you all right?” Maria asked him out of nowhere.

“I’m fine, it didn’t— hasn’t even touched me,” Grip shrugged her off and realized he’s so. fed. up. with. languages. Every single one of them.

He told everyone he’s off to bed, left Thalia in the spotlight that has since shifted from the door frame to the couch, washed his hands and headed to his room, firmly determined to get some sleep. Greeted by the furious flashing of his phone, he groaned and put the pencil and paper onto the bed.

*“Agent. Report.’ Derevyashko.”* displayed the phone after unlocking.

Just what he needed right now!

“*‘Situation normal. Your agent. Sleep.’*”, Grip wrote back, flipped the phone, climbed into bed and fell asleep.



# (Not) organized

Turning in bed came to an abrupt end once the pencil poked Grip between the ribs. In retrospect, placing it on the bed was a terrible idea.

The footboard was adorned with another thermal suit. Grip's phone blinked downwards demandingly on the bedside table.

Yesterday's

*"Agent, report."*

*"Situation normal. Your agent. Sleep."*

grew a slightly less laconic:

*"Outta your mind? A report to me, hi to mom. Now."*

Grip yawned and elaborated:

*"There will be a second contact. There is a new word. Obtained permission to demonstrate several objects. Negotiations are carried out with a totally new alien, who has never talked to humans before."*

There was also a “you didn’t look great last night, please come for a checkup” from Maria and an audio from mom. Mom has sent some very generic words on how proud she is and how she misses him already. She didn’t sound overly worried, more like, feeling down in general. Grip decided against disclosing anything specific about the mission, only what he feels about it; and concluded with a request to tell him more about her and her life.

OK, now, Maria. Grip’s mouth was dry, he was hungry. Wait, did he eat anything yesterday? No surprise tha—

A phone rang right in his hand. Dan:

“Morning, colleague. Listen, the system isn’t ideal here, I mean, I don’t see what you’re sending and where. Just the size of it. Also means I have no idea what’s urgent and what can wait. So, please, when you send something urgent, drop me a message shortly afterwards. This way I’ll know it should go out right away, OK?”

“Sure. The first one was a report, so I guess you should—”

“A report, you say?” Dan chuckled. “OK, I’ll send it right away. See ya—”

“Wait, and... about the other one. How often do you send them?”

“You mean, batched ones? These will go out with the next batch, so could be up to 8 hours of delay if you’re particularly unlucky with timing.”

“Thank you!” Grip was, once again falling prey to that exhausting mode of operation, when he grasped the general sense, but only

a fraction of the words making it up. Yet there was, seemingly, nothing worth clarifying. “The second one can wait.”  
“Got you, and sorry for the hassle. The system, y’know.”  
“Yeah-yeah, no problem.”

So. Checkup. Maria. Where is that? Grip couldn’t navigate the first half of the base.

“Where should I go?” he wrote, changed his clothes and read the answer:

“Come to the teleports.”

Cool. Can do.

At the last crossing, Maria called him through a door frame. Turns out her room was right here, just a flimsy separator wall away from the teleports... Not a room, a study. A lab, even. Screens with some graphs and drawings, translucent... tableware?... with unidentifiable stuff inside. And a small boring fridge by the entrance, one thing Grip could identify with absolute certainty. The equipment looked more electronic than biomedical to Grip, there were even wires in one of the table corners. The room looked like neither an operating room, nor a doctor’s office; there wasn’t even a second chair, let alone a sofa.

“Hi, thanks for coming.”

“Hello. Is there something wrong with me?”

“I don’t know— I should mention upfront, I’m not a doctor—I just don’t like how you looked last night. You were fine at first, then suddenly got all pale and tired.”

“But...” Grip fumbled. “It’s normal, isn’t it? To be tired after...

teleporting.”

“No, it’s not,” Maria shook her head. “You’re supposed to feel great post-hop. Well-rested, satiated... not hungry,” she rephrased after seeing Grip frown.

She sent a long thoughtful look across the room, but, before Grip could follow it, addressed him again:

“Anyway, come with me, let’s not make it awkward with the hand scanner.”

They returned to the teleports, where Maria opened the lid of the closest one, and made an inviting gesture with her hand. The lid looked rather heavy, adorned with shiny mechanisms hanging downwards from it. Grip climbed in awkwardly, laid on his back and asked:

“Should I stop breathing?”

“Please don’t stop breathing,” Maria answered with a straight face. “I’m no doctor, but that doesn’t sound healthy at all.”

Her phone rang.

“Yeah and no matter what’s happening, don’t touch the moving parts.”

And then, into the phone:

“Hi, Lee!.. Nope, I’m not planning to... It’s just a medical scan... no-no, a quick one... bye-bye!”

She closed the lid, leaving Grip alone in a dimly-lit box, with the said moving parts set in motion immediately, right above his face. The hard bottom of the box and something else moving almost out of his sight haven’t helped him feel any comfortable.

Meanwhile, voices started screaming outside. Someone shouted at Maria, Maria defended herself. Suddenly everything went quiet, the movement has stopped, and the lid went up. Stalina Filantievna hoisted Grip onto her shoulder unceremoniously, then, immediately, carefully put him down on the floor.

“As you can see for yourself, he definitely is not!” Maria argued. “What in the world, how dare you even think you’re cleared for this?”

Stalina Filantievna walked up to her menacingly. Without a clear overarching context, the individual words no longer clicked together.

“Snap out of it, what are you implying? Before you make a fool out of yourself, what exactly are you planning to incriminate?” Stalina Filantievna didn’t wait for her to finish, and the resulting mash was no longer even segmentable into words.

Grip looked around, disoriented, and noticed Thalia observing the scene from where they came from, listening carefully, two colourful tubes in her hand. She caught his glance and waved at him. As Grip approached Thalia, she was stepping back absentmindedly, until she lured him into the lab, around the fridge and into the corner. There she sat on the floor, listening to the commotion through the separator.

“*What’s going on?*” Grip whispered, sitting down next to her.

“*Maria put you into our scanner,*” Thalia glanced across him briefly, focused on the other conversation.

“*So?*”

She looked at him quizzingly.

*"Uh, nothing, I guess," she replied. "You're not paralysed, what..." she paused again to parse the concurrent speech behind the separator. "... what is she gonna do? Make Grip-shaped steaks?"*

*"... .. a photo should be enough to make a steak..."* Grip speculated.

*"But the taste? It just won't be... Shush,"* she raised her palm in a stopping gesture.

The voices stopped, replaced with energetic steps. Stalina Filantievna and Maria are leaving? Coming here? Probably, that's what Thalia is figuring out as well. No, not here. To the canteen?

Thalia relaxed and conspired:

*"Would you like some ice cream?"*

*"You bet!"* Grip's morale soared.

Not only he was hungry; Epsilon Indi 3 climate lent itself perfectly to ice cream.

Thalia smiled wide, put the tubes aside and flicked her wrist demonstratively. Two long spoons appeared out of nowhere, spinning between her fingers before getting handed to Grip. Then she opened the fridge to produce a glass container out of it, flashing a menacing pile of sticker-laden syringes for a split second. Thalia then took one of the spoons back to split the ice cream roughly in two halves. Grip wasted no time tasting his.

*"So bland."*

*"How ungrateful of you,"* she parried with mock indignation and grabbed the tubes. *"Pick your poison."*

Grip chose the one with the orange cap. Attachment, possibly, that's a bit too large for a cap. Thalia took the blue one and squeezed it out onto her half.

*"That's the stuff."*

Mixed with the orange-flavoured goo, the ice cream turned delicious. Grip stuffed his face excitedly, Thalia mostly kept up.

*"Lick the spoon good,"* she instructed, as he scooped the last solid chunk.

*"So that you can collect my biological material? Gonna clone me?"*

*"Don't wanna stain my suit, stupid."*

*"Sorry,"* Grip backtracked. *"Thank you for the ice cream."*

Placing the container back to the fridge offered Grip another brief glance at the syringe pile. The closest sticker said "Maria". Spoons were then spun back into oblivion with another flick of a wrist.

*"Let's go, we've got a lot to cover."*

*"Got what?"* Grip caught up to her.

*"Like, order everything you've promised to bring yesterday? And come up with at least some semblance of a plan. And you, obviously, didn't write your reports. And we should probably show the new signs to Irakli."*

*"And I should also find some time to study,"* Grip muttered absentmindedly. *"Hope they've calmed down already."*

He finished that sentence and stopped to listen. As it was evident from over here, they haven't entirely calmed down.

*"Why— If you say it's no big deal, why are they still upset about it?"*

Thalia found the question funny:

*"Adults...",* she waved her hands around vaguely, gathering words, *"Just like kids, you know. Go make them do their jobs."*

*"Me?"*

*"Why, who's a diplomat, you or them? We're a contact group, like, a diplomatic corps. So, that'd make them service personnel to us, they're here to help us,"* Thalia dispensed these ideas bit-by-bit, giving Grip's world view ample time to turn on its head. *"And what they're doing now ain't helping."*

The voice from the canteen became unusually monotonous, as if Stalina Filantievna started dictating something.

*"So, show them who's the boss and make them cut this nonsense,"* Thalia concluded, all without Grip finding a single weak link in her reasoning.

The voices got more emotional again. Grip hesitated.

*"Haven't you learned at least some style?"* Thalia wondered.

*"Learned what?"* Grip snapped out of thinking.

*"How to maintain composure. Put on a face. Ah, whatever. Just be confident, like you're the adult here, and they're just kids quarrelling. Bring it on,"* Thalia concluded and dragged him towards the canteen.

Grip remembered his first lesson on style, but couldn't figure out



how was that applicable now. They've marched to the canteen, Grip scrambled for words, then started listening to Maria's quiet counterargument, but too late ("—played by the letter and the spirit of the joint—"? what?), as Thalia, a sly fox, fell two steps behind at the last moment, turning their entrance into his entrance. Well, telling her what he thinks of her would be out of style.

"Crew!" Grip barked, interrupting Maria.

She, Lisa, Stalina Filantievna, Irakli Kosmovich sitting aloof — everyone stared at him.

"What are you doing here, why aren't you working!" he continued. "Our next meeting with lizards is in, what, 9 hours, and we've got a lot of work to do! Stalina! Start with printing us a glowing stick."

"Aye!" Stalina affirmed indistinctly without changing her pose. Irakli grunted approvingly, well-pleased, the rest watched Grip with a growing interest.

"Maria!" Grip turned. "Let's go, we need you to draw animals. Irakli Kosmovich, I'll visit you later today."

Maria stood up slowly and went out. Grip turned around to follow her, but Thalia fell behind again for a second before catching up.

*"And why do you fall behind?"*

*"Shook a finger at them,"* Thalia reported.

Grip let out a long sigh.

"What do you mean: 'draw animals'?" Maria asked, confused.

"That was— I told you yesterday, Newt has expressed an interest in animals, and we've promised him we'll bring pictures— He calls those 'schemes'," Thalia began to explain.

"Newt?" Grip frowned.

"Yeah, yeah, I know, I just can't resist—" she made a grimace.

"Thalia..." Maria interjected.

"—he calls himself 'new', and newts are some kind of lizards."

"Newts are not lizards, newts are salamanders," Maria objected, "and your friend over there is neither! Also, since you're clearly not listening, so I'll try to get through to Grip instead. It's a bad idea to call him... it... a name it didn't pick itself! How would you like him calling you names they choose?"

"... they'll have to choose names for us if they want to call us something."

"Yeah," Thalia backed him. "They can't call us our names anyway."

"That's not what I meant. What if he doesn't like his."

"Why wouldn't he?" Thalia wondered. "When he calls himself 'new'."

"Who knows. What if they find real newts ugly? Also, why do you think it's a 'he'?" Maria finished triumphantly.

"He... no idea..." she trailed off, befuddled.

Once Maria sat down, she got bombarded with conflicting requirements. Took a while for her to understand the contact group wanted schematic drawings of various small animals with a lizard thrown in for scale, plus tables of animals' parameters for the reference. The selection of said animals proved to be the

hardest part.

“A chicken!”

“Ooh! Yeah! And a hen! And an egg! All together, same picture.

Lizards do lay eggs, don’t they?”

“No. They absolutely don’t. They give live birth to little lizards.

Are you still sure you want a chicken?”

“Yes!”

“As you say... but that means, we’re dropping something else.”

“Growlick?”

“No, not the growlick!”

A three-in-one chicken, a hare and a fly made it to the top three list, but, at the last moment, Grip insisted on an amoeba as well. Maria corrected their wild ideas on biology with incessant pedantry, and already started putting up a collage of a hen, a chick, an egg and a half-transparent lizard.

“When will they be ready?” Grip asked.

“Let me see... Give me five, maybe three hours. I’m a biologist, not an illustrator.”

“Oh! We also need to print that other stuff.”

“Go ahead, I’ll find you later,” Thalia decided to stay behind.

“Wait-wait-wait, just a minute,” Maria opened something else, colourful and blurry, then scrolled through a long list of numbers for a while. “I don’t have a complete scan, but it’s clear anyway you’re dehydrated. Don’t let that suit fool you, it’s hot here, even inside, so you sweat a lot. Meaning you need to drink much more water. You know where to get water, don’t

you?"

"Yes, I understand, I will drink more."

Stalina Filantievna intercepted Grip on his way to find her.

*"What were you even thinking about, crawling into their scanner!"* she uttered, joining him in the long hallway to the canteen.

*"Sorry, what's the problem?"*

*"Maria— the Fist would be able to print you!"*

*"... and learn all our secrets, uh-huh. What kind of federal secrets I know that Thalia doesn't?"*

*"None whatsoever,"* she argued not.

*"And there's nothing special about me myself."*

*"As you say."*

*"So?"*

*"So?! The ability to print someone exerts a lot of power over them. Just think about it later."*

*"But they can't print me, can they?"*

*"No, they cannot,"* she admitted reluctantly.

*"And you can."*

*"I can."*

*"So, that ship has sailed."*

*"There's us and there's Fist. Never ever set foot in their scanner again."*

*"Understood. As you say."*

They found themselves standing in the canteen.

*"You wanted to print something,"* she reminded, handing him a

glow stick.

Grip snapped it, engulfed it with his hand, observed the light. At least that was better than nothing.

*"Is it dangerous for lizards? If one wants to bite it, I mean."*

*"When you don't know for sure, always assume it is."*

*"I want more of these. At least one each day."*

*"Sure, I'll print some more."*

*"Thanks, but that's not all. A magnifying glass."*

*"Just don't burn anyone with it, OK?"*

*"We're meeting at dusk."*

*"With a handle or without one?"*

*"Without one, I mean, a small one."*

She pulled a phone out of her pocket, fiddled with it briefly, lowered it, so that Grip can see the screen:

*"Like this?"*

*"Uh... is it a small one?"*

*"About this large."*

*"Make it half the size. Good. Now something rechargeable, fluorescent..."*

Interior decoration catalogue offered a white-ish star.

*"This one, perfect! And I also need a water bottle."*

*"Sure thing..."*

She started scrolling through pictures of bottles really fast. Grip has noticed some motion on the periphery, but he was too busy with the carousel of—

*"This one— one step back—just like I have at home. Maria told me to drink more."*

*“By the way, were you planning to feed him?”* Thalia asked mockingly.

They both turned to the table. Thalia avoided eye contact by immediately drinking from a glass, but this tactic had an obvious downside: she couldn't drink forever, and had to lower it eventually and proceed:

*“Relax, I fed him an orange one already. By the way, Grip, they're in that drawer over there.”*

Grip grabbed a blue-tipped tube, and tasted its content. Without the ice cream, it wasn't nearly that great. Stalina Filantievna just observed her with an expressionless face, until Thalia felt uncomfortable and changed the subject:

*“Stali-ina Filantievna-a, print us a ball.”*

Grip's phone ticked.

*“Should I also print you goals?”* she parried calmly.

*“There must be some category for that.”*

*“There is none.”*

*“Come on, ple-ease...”*

Besides the “I've got a sample for you to check” from Maria, there was a missed one from the chief: *“Write so that if you die, the next one can read it and continue the work.”* Grip shivered.

*“I said ‘no’.”*

*“Maria has something to show us,”* Grip addressed Thalia.

A “preview” they've collected out of the teleport turned out to be the first picture they've ordered. Maria accepted corrections, asked questions about the next ones, then decided to give them a

short and boring lecture on the scarce local life. Not-lizards aside, it amounted to not-cacti growing here and there plus some flying not-insects symbiotic to them. None of the two really needed not-lizards, who, in turn, gleefully snacked on them both. The microscopic life was much more diverse, but Grip didn't understand most of that and found the rest yawn-inducing.

The knowledge fountain almost dried up, when Thalia commented, out of the blue:

"Maria thinks the lizards aren't sentient."

Maria's hand jerked involuntarily, leaving her to blankly stare at the lizard's claw on the picture obscuring the entirety of amoeba. She then turned around to lecture Thalia back with reinvigorated enthusiasm:

"No! Are you a diplomat or what?"

*"She's a provocator, that's who she is,"* Grip remarked with condemnation.

Maria's agreement was so strong at the moment, the language barrier meant nothing to her.

"First!" she nodded furiously. "Let's set it straight," "First of all, don't you dare say that to them! They're clearly sentient, what I'm saying is, I don't see why would they be," she cooled off gradually. "Their brains are not that large, and, perhaps more importantly, I don't see what evolutionary benefit would that bring. The lifestyle they lead, it doesn't force them to collaborate... or compete, even. Nor invent tools, nor solve complex puzzles. But they do talk, they have a culture of their own, so, clearly, I'd be in the wrong if I ever claimed that. They

are sentient. I just don't know why.”  
Grip braced himself for a “second”, but, somehow, there was no “second”. So he thanked Maria for her help, and dragged Thalia away, just in case.

Irakli Kosmovich waited for them:

“Hello,” they greeted him in unison.

“Hello-hello, boss,” Irakli singled Grip out. *“That’s one stern talk you gave’em.”*

“Well, *why couldn’t they—*”

“*You’re right,*” he toned down the mockery. *“A mountain out of a molehill. As if it was something— wait, don’t, don’t sit down on the floor, you sprout. Go find another chair or, I don’t know, sit on the table.”*

Irakli Kosmovich moved a stack of papers and Thalia hopped onto the corner of the table. Grip opted to stand.

“*I didn’t know lizards write so fancy. Upside down, in columns, their tail working both sides as they walk...*”

“*Oh yeah,*” Irakli nodded apologetically. *“That’s not something your courses feature. All because we were forced to hammer their writing into European typesetting practices stemming from what, 15th century? On the other hand, imagine we dumped all of that on you at once, and forced you to write upside down in joint... Anyway, you’re good? Have you figured it all out?”*

“*Yeah, we have. I’ve brought new signs.*”

“*That’s great, let me see... I know this one, it’s a ‘plan’ or a ‘scheme’. Works figuratively as well, by the way. Does that*



*match up? With the usage you've observed."*

"It does," Grip agreed with a trace of disappointment. *"May be 'picture' as well. And this one must be 'water'."*

*"Uh-nah, can't be water. Fellas don't even have water."*

"What could it be then?" Thalia asked.

*"Tah-tah-tah... It's a seldom used one, I'm not sure whether we have this one figured out... I had it somewhere over here, give me some—yeah, must be in this one..."*

He dug deep into his papers, got lost, tried one from each of the stacks in the front row, one from the stack behind Thalia, brightened up, grabbed some more...

*"Here, yes!"*

Grip recognized the tale from his studying materials. Except here it featured an extra sign:

*"[we] [be-tired] [?#2?-in]*

*|[we] [want] [eat']"*

*"Yeah, that doesn't quite fit..."* he had to admit. *"Could it be figurative?"*

*"Nothing is off the table. Ask them."*

*"We already had,"* Thalia was timid and respectful, as if she ran out of her troublemaking steam for today.

*"And?"*

*"And he said he can't explain it, and he has to think this through."*

*"He said it's inexplicable,"* Grip corrected her.

*"Well, he'd better think about it,"* Irakli Kosmovich shrugged.

*"For I don't know."*

*"Do lizards sweat?"* Grip wondered.

*“Do lizards... sweat? I don’t know. I don’t recall them saying anything that’d suggest—”*

*“Let’s just ask Maria,”* Thalia reached for the phone.

*“Why have you omitted the sign? From the tale, I mean.”*

*“A tale... Irakli Kosmovich stretched out and smiled.” That’s cute. Because millions of pupils would ask hundreds of thousands of teachers what does it mean, and out of hundreds of thousands of them, there are almost zero who are fine with admitting they don’t know the answer... But the tale,”* he stressed the word, *“was too good to just drop it altogether because of just one sign, wasn’t it? And it’s not like the meaning hinges on it or anything.”*

*“No, they don’t sweat,”* Thalia informed them after a short silence.

*“How much white noise can you recall?”* Irakli Kosmovich asked her.

*“Two kilobits,”* Thalia replied, proud of herself.

Wide-eyed and frowning, Grip had no idea what was that about.

*“Attagirl, now that’s what I call a spy! Two kilobits! No paper for you,”* he made an exaggerated protective gesture over one of the paper stacks.

*“Why would we both carry paper? I can borrow Grip’s anytime.”*

*“That’s true,”* Irakli Kosmovich conceded.

The topic seemed to be exhausted, and Grip started a new one:

*“Newt wants to learn our language.”*

*“Interesting,”* Irakli Kosmovich replied with a particular lack of interest in his voice. *“That’s a nice name she came up with, isn’t*

it?"

"And what do we do?" Thalia asked.

"And what have you tried?" a spark of curiosity flashed in his eyes.

"I wrote 'greetings,'" Grip admitted. *"He said that's 'too many signs, too many sounds'."*

"And I wrote 'hi,'" Thalia added smugly. *"He liked that one better."* Irakli Kosmovich just smiled without commenting.

"So, what do we do now?" Grip broke the silence.

*"Maintain this interest carefully. Teach him a few simple words—no sentences, no inflections, no conjunctions, no nothing; a handful of short words, single form only. If he'll still be interested, we'll see what to do then. But don't rush it."*

"We speak, he writes?" Thalia clarified.

*"You write, he writes. I don't think he can make out our speech."*

The disagreement took over Grip and Thalia:

*"Why would you say so!"*

*"No! He does! I think..."*

Irakli Kosmovich was unfazed by the sudden united front.

*"Well, see for yourself."*

He took Grip's piece of paper and started jotting down consonant pairs: *"b-p", "g-k", "z-s" ...*

*"Don't get your hopes high. Consider this, just how likely would that be? They've got radically different phonetics, they just don't... have a use for telling our sounds apart... possibly not even the body parts required for that. I'd be surprised if Newt understands our speech one day."*

*"Haven't you tried that already?"*

*"They have expressed no interest in learning our language before."*

He ended the list with pairs of Russian vowels.

*"Thank you," Grip took the paper back. "We'll see. I think he really is curious about it."*

*"Good luck. To you and to him. Don't rush it, cherish that curiosity."*

*"We'll try to,"* Thalia jumped down, and they left for Grip's room.

*"So, what's the plan?"* she asked once they got there.

*"Guess what, I still don't have a plan."*

*"You know, I'm actually OK with how it's going. With you taking the lead and me on the sidelines. But we need to agree on some key points. I think that we should not ask him about them at all."*

*"We shouldn't. I agree,"* Grip nodded. *"He wants to know more about us? Good, we give it to him. Show him these sounds, simple words, maybe, pictures, that's for sure. Can you pick up the pictures?"*

*"Sure. Otherwise, you won't even begin with the report, would you?"*

His sigh of martyrdom marked her unexpected exit.

Grip lay on the bed, facing his grim assignment at last. Reflecting back, he simply had too much craziness to chronicle. To get to the point quicker, he decisively condensed everything preceding the contact itself to just:

*I arrived.*

and then jumped straight to the contact. It was unclear what was novel and what has already been documented excessively over the last year. It was also unclear whether the awkwardness of their first columns posed any value to humanity. And it was especially unclear how to preserve all the ambivalence-laden misunderstandings of yesterday, provided he's successfully forgotten the exact wording of pretty much everything. But then there was also the overwhelmingly good stuff (he talked to an alien! it drank from his hand! the not-water sign!), and it was steadily shaping into his longest essay ever.

One time he got interrupted by Stalina Filantievna, who brought a magnifying glass, a star, more sticks and a water bottle. Grip used that as an excuse to embark on a break. Then, when he was deep into editing, Thalia brought pictures, and he had to read the accompanying text. When, at long last, he sent out his first report, it was almost time to go gather material for the second one.

That day they left even earlier. With the sun still above the horizon, they sat in the centre of the dome, bored, until another swarm of lizards swept across the desert. As if captured by their stream, they ran on the sand and then drifted a bit along the wall, admiring the swarm from a much closer distance. The distraction let Newt arrive unnoticed until the doors' went hissing. He initially dashed towards the centre, but altered his course after his first stop inside. The second meeting was thus held on the sand, near the wall.

Once he got close, Newt dropped something down. Grip carefully

picked up the green, moist offering, with sand on the underside. “Cactus! Juice! Cactus juice!” Thalia recognized it as well. “[be-?#2?-?]”

“[I] [think] | [I] [show]” Newt chittered and wrote towards her. Grip carefully placed the gift on top of the water bottle cap, diverting a surge of Newt’s inexplicable, silent attention to the bottle.

Animal pictures were the first item on the agenda. While, for example, the “lizard for scale” concept required minimal explanations, the hen-chick-egg trinity really threw a spanner in the works. It proved difficult to convey the idea of all three of them being the same animal, and the simple “[aforementioned] | [be-different-not]” didn’t work out for some reason. The lack of the transitions in the language and a severely underdeveloped concept of ‘age’ only complicated the matters. They didn’t even have a sign for an egg, they just used an egg-shaped contour — that was quite a mess. It was only when Grip drew a line from an “[animal] [be-new]” to the “[animal] [be-new-not]”, and Newt augmented that with an egg, forming a counter-clockwise egg-chick-hen-egg cycle to run around, the gears in Newt’s head got unstuck, and he seemed to internalize the concept.

To make the experience more varied, Grip demoed him a magnifying glass next. He put the paper against the wall, wrote “[substance] [help] [see]” on it, brought it to the sand and put a magnifying glass on top of the writing. Newt then proved rather enthusiastic against moving the glass across the paper with

his front paws and nose, sparing little attention to the optical properties of it.

Thalia proceeded with the rest of the animals. Newt probed the hare picture with his nose, saying nothing; calmly received the news of flies going “[sky-in]”, held a brief conversation on the topic of their edibility; then somehow took an issue with amoebas’ existence:

“[animal] [be-small] | [exist-not] [purpose]” he insisted.

Thalia put that picture away, but Newt kept complaining:

“[I] [want-not] [see] [schemes]”

| [I] [want] [see] [animals]”

*“And you’re gotta get animals,”* Grip promised out loud.

*“What are you up to?”*

*“Not sure, I haven’t fully decided yet.”*

*“And you’re promising it already!”*

“[you] | [be-proper-?]” Newt wrote in the meantime, turned towards Thalia.

“Am I?” she wondered aloud.

“Who knows.”

“[I] | [know-not]” she wrote back.

Newt ran in circles, calmed down, did not elaborate.

“[I] [want] [see] [animals] [yours-of]

| [I] [want] [see] [living place] [yours-of]”

“[you] [want] | [go’-?] [living place’-?]” Grip tried to clarify.

“[be-news-not] [know-not] | [we] [go]” Newt wrote hastily instead of answering.

“Awesome,” Thalia remarked dryly through pursed lips.

Grip didn't know what to do with this newfound headache of them, so he went further with the plan: demoed the dimly glowing star. Newt poked it the same way he explored every other object.

“[I] [can-?] [hold'] | [object'] [be-sun] [be-danger-?]"

“[do-hold] | [do-eat-not]"

Newt ran around with the star in its mouth, while Grip massaged his temples. That [hold] could potentially mean ownership, if lizard possessives ever had anything to do with ownership. Grip decided he's not taking it back.

“[be-hot-not] | [true]" Newt admitted after the running part.

They moved on to the glow stick, another impressive [be-hot-not] object that made Newt put the star down. It was fun, but hasn't entirely solved the reading in the dark problem, as the glow stick did a better job glowing them into their eyes than onto the tailwriting. Covering it with a hand helped, but was not convenient at all.

OK, that was the last thing to show... Grip glanced at the bottle.

“[you] [explain] [juice'] | [I] [understand] [juice']" he wrote, now certain that [?#2?] means “juice”.

Newt either didn't get it or just wasn't compelled to respond, so Grip completed:

“[exist] [I-in] [juice']".

Another glance, no objection, no agreement, no response. Time for a demo then!



“[do-see]” Grip wrote, rolled up his sleeve and placed the hand onto the sand.

Once sweat started rolling down, Newt outright panicked, running around, rattling, staring at Grip, running again, and then finally expressing it in writing:

“[do-show-not]”

“*Stop it, you’re making him nervous,*” Thalia got worried as well.

“[exist-not] | [danger]” Grip tried to write with the other hand, while Newt interfered, ran in front of the finger, and, later, erased the first part, leaving just “[danger]”.

“*Stop it,*” she insisted, so Grip sat straight and rolled the sleeve back.

Newt lay down and observed him motionlessly, at least the part he could see without raising his head.

“*It’s not gonna kill me!*”

“*I do know, yes. He doesn’t.*”

Grip moved the bottle in front of Newt and tapped it, making him stand up reluctantly and look him at the finger.

“[aforementioned] [be-juice] [sky-of]” Grip announced.

That led to running and a subsequent denial:

“[exist-not] [juice] [sky-of]”

Grip tapped the previous writing again.

“[sky] | [be-substance-not]” Newt came up with a counter-argument.

“[sky] | [be-substance]” Thalia weighted in.

“[can] [hold] [substance] | [can-?] [hold] [sky]” Newt had well-

founded doubts.

*"Oh, I'm gonna show you it's material,"* Grip let out a vaguely threatening remark, inhaled deeply, bent forward towards Newt and blew onto him.

Thalia immediately started pulling Grip back by his suit, as Newt backed off slowly.

*"A genius move, a wondrous decision,"* Thalia told him off. *"Do you have the slightest idea what could that mean in their etiquette?"*

*"[do-go]"* Grip wrote and pointed to their side of the dome.

*"First point, then tell him to go anywhere. Imagine he just went home, what would you do then?"* Thalia kept telling Grip off.

*"[you] [do-hold] | [we] [do-go]"*

*"O-oh, nice, 'we' includes us now. Put your hand back,"* Thalia's mood swung back.

Grip obliged and Newt carefully climbed his hand. After the softest, smoothest walk of Grip's entire life, Newt was held in front of the air tube for more dignified [sky'] touching on its own terms. He moved his head in and out of the air stream.

*"I think he likes it,"* Thalia commented.

Newt clicked and rattled in response to that, and, one long walk later, was brought back to the sand.

*"[I] | [understand]"* he wrote, and then dispensed a cryptic *"[can-not] [hold'] | [can] [hold']"*

Grip considered this a victory, but the very next column has wiped the smile off his face:

*"[yous] [do-hold-?] [purpose'] | [do-explain] [purpose'] [yours-of]"*

*“Oh, here goes who-knows-what again,”* he vented.

*“What is this one again? ‘Target’?”* Thalia asked in a worrying tone.

*“No, ‘purpose’. ‘Usefulness’.”*

*“Like, goal? What’s our goal?”*

*“No— almost, but the other way. Our purpose. To them.”*

*“He’s asking us what do they want?”*

Newt turned his head between them as they spoke. There was no good answer.

*“[I] [understand-not] [aforementioned’] | [I] [hold-not] [purpose’]”*  
*“[hold] | [purpose’]”*

*“Good news, everybody. Everything has its purpose,”* Thalia snarked melancholically.

*“Don’t forget to bring yours next time,”* Grip snarked back.

*“[you] [want] [object’-?] | [do-explain] [category’] [object-of’]”*  
*“[purpose] | [be-object-not]”*

*“[you] [want] [help’] [ours-of] | [ours] [want] [help’] [yours’]”*  
Newt just stared at them, which could mean anything.

*“Change the subject,”* Thalia came off tense and uneasy.

*“What?”*

*“Just trust me, OK? This is bad.”*

*“[you] [want] [food’-?]”* Grip took a shot in the dark.

*“[ours] [hold] [food’]”*

*“[food] | [be-many-?]”*

*“[food] [be-many] [ours] [be-many]*

*| [food] [be-many-not] [ours] [be-many-not]”*

“[you] [want-?] | [food’] [be-many]” Grip hoped that he found a way to help.

“[true-not]”

What could be the most important conversation of the day turned into a dead-end.

“[do-go] [do-hold] [purpose’]” Newt was at it again.

*“Go there, I don’t know where, // Bring me that, I don’t know what.”* Grip complained again.

*“Change the subject, now,”* Thalia was not amused.

“[I] [understand-not] [purpose’] | [I] [show] [animal’]” Grip wrote, exciting no less than three rounds of running.

“[you] | [be-proper]” Newt praised him. At least that felt like a praise.

“Good,” Thalia commended him as well.

“Now we know I’m proper. Not so sure about you though,” Grip joked in a tired voice.

“[do-explain] | [be-proper’]” Thalia requested.

“[I] [show] | [you] [do-aforementioned]” Newt explained readily.

Waited out a pause and, seeing no hands move, added:

“[aforementioned] [be-proper]”

“I tell you what’s proper, you do what’s proper, and that’d be proper?” Thalia thought out loud.

“Obeying is proper,” Grip shook his head. “No—”

“Following rules is proper,” Thalia stated.

“—commanding is proper.”

“[be-news-not] | [be-proper-?]” Grip inquired.

“[exist-?] [be-news-not'] [be-proper]” Newt evaded the question.  
“[you] [be-proper-?] | [I] [be-proper-?]”  
“[true] | [true]”

It got so dark again, Grip could no longer afford to ignore the tail movements and rattling. And it was during that double [true], when the link between these two has clicked for him. It was so simple, really. Click-click, sideswipe-sideswipe, long curvy downwards rumble. Or an upwards rumble. So, a forward rumble. Anyway, Grip now knew how the written form of [true] defined its sound. Not like he could pronounce it though. Maybe he could tell it apart from the rest, maybe not, there were just too many of them to confuse it with. Like, say, [true-not].

That brought him to change the subject. Sounds!

“[you] [want-?] [know'] [sounds'] [ours-of]

“[true]” Newt waved its tail.

“[I] [show] [sounds]

| [do-show] [be-different-?] [be-different-not-?]”

Newt waited patiently.

“‘B’, ‘P’. ‘B’, ‘P’. ‘B’, ‘P’.”

“[be-different]” Newt concluded after a pause.

“‘G’, ‘K’. ‘G’, ‘K’. ‘G’, ‘K’.”

“[be-different]”

“Wait, no,” Thalia interrupted them. “Repeat after me. ‘EE’. ‘EE’. ‘EE’.”

“‘EE’. ‘EE’. ‘EE’.”

“[be-different-not]” Newt wrote to the other side.

*“Yay! Take that,”* Thalia laughed victoriously.

It wasn't a smooth sailing for Newt: while he was improving, say, the 'Z-S' distinction just didn't work for him no matter what. But is it really that important? Happy for advancing science, Grip put down his paper, and, suddenly, the tables have turned.

“[I] [show] [sounds'] | [you] [show] [be-different'-?]" rattling and clicking, Newt started an exam of its own.

Grip did his best, not rewarded with a single hint on how he's doing. Though, to be fair, neither did he provide any feedback to Newt.

“[I] [know'-?] [be-different'-?]" Grip asked in the end.

“[true]" Newt's reply was terse.

*“So we will speak one day, you and me..."*

As usual, Newt listened to the words carefully, while, obviously, understanding none of them.

“[exist] [up-in] [sun'] [exist] [down-in] [sun']

[exist-not] [here-in] [I'] [exist] [here-in] [I']" Newt wrote in two columns at once.

“[exist] [up-in] [sun'] [exist] [down-in] [sun']

[exist-not] [here-in] [we'] [exist] [here-in] [we']" Grip completed the ritual, lagging behind with his column-by-column writing.

“[do-go] [do-hold] [purpose'] | [do-go] [do-hold] [animal']" Newt placed his order and left.

“Whew," Thalia broke her long silence. “What are you gonna bring him?"

... pick up everything, but the star; take a sip from the bottle first

...

"A fish," Grip revealed his plan.

"A fish? Why?"

"Because it's safe... you know... aquarium."

"Huh. Makes sense, I guess."

*"What does he want us to bring? That 'purpose'."*

*"If only I knew,"* Thalia paused putting on her suit for a moment.

*"I don't like it. At all. This is gonna pose a problem."*

*"He wants us to help them. Help with what?"*

*"Do you think they need our help? They seem to fare just fine."*

*"Well, if they do, I'm all for helping."*

The outer door hissed open, revealing another surprise: a large, adult lizard froze in their way, staring at them. When Grip decided to resolve the stand-off and flank it, indicating "I see you, I want to go around you" with all his body language, the lizard just burrowed into the sand and left. They walked around that place anyway.

Their evening reception at the station got less grandiose. There was no screen with Dan and Lee this time, Irakli Kosmovich was missing as well.

"How's it going, night owls?" Lisa asked.

"Fine, mostly fine," Thalia replied.

"What's the matter?"

"Newt is asking us, what are we here for."

"And what can we help with," Grip added.

"And... what do they need our help with?" Stalina Filantievna

inquired.

“That’s the big question,” Thalia sighed. “And fish is not the answer.”

“Fish?” Stalina Filantievna frowned.

“Yeah, about that... We need a fish,” Grip addressed Maria.

“I– I’ll think about that. You wanna bring him a fish?” she repeated.

“Yes. He wanted to see real animals. We should start with a fish.”

“That’s... not a simple request,” Maria worried about something.

“What’s the problem?” Thalia mirrored her tone.

“Not a particularly fish-friendly planet we’ve... they’ve got here...” Maria replied absentmindedly. “OK, I’ll come up with something tomorrow, and, yeah, thanks for the heads-up. There must be some of them, th– errr, sorry, what’s that?”

“A piece of cactus. With some sand on it. I think. And my hand. Could you, please, scan it?”

“This piece of a cactus?”

“And my hand,” Grip repeated. “Newt sat on it. And I’ve carried him around the dome.”

“OK, you can explain it all on the way.”

Thalia also kept them company.

Grip deposited the cactus into one of the containers, while Thalia explained it’s not the palm that should be scanned, but the wrist. Maria slowly waved her hand scanner along the entire arm, only to declare there’s nothing unusual or dangerous detected.

Back in the hallway, Grip spoke up quietly:



*“We also need to discuss how—”*

*“Let’s deal with it tomorrow,”* Thalia interrupted him rudely, only to pull him by his hand.

They went to the showers in silence, where she turned on the tap and started washing her hands. Once Grip followed suit, she added, barely audible over the running water:

*“I’ll come up with a way to talk. And what to do,”*

... turned off the tap, wished him good night and ran away.

Grip wandered slowly to his room. The Epsilon Indi 3 day duration was killing him. Just staring past his phone and gathering his thoughts was exhausting enough. Writing a report? That’s simply not— Hmph! Don’t you dare roll down again, you naughty pencil. What if we prop you up with a phone...



## **(Not) resolved**

Can a lowly intercivilizational contactee ever get a good night of sleep on this planet?! This morning he was unceremoniously poked in the ribs with a finger, right before catching a glimpse of Thalia running away. Sigh. The phone can wait then.

Grip headed directly to the canteen, exchanged greetings with Irakli Kosmovich in the hallway, and arrived in time to witness some dramatic scene. Lisa was the centrepiece of it, lying on the sofa, staring blankly at the brightly shining ceiling, as if she was mourning the untimely demise of the world as we know it. Distracting her from this tragic idleness was Thalia annoying Stalina Filantievna in full swing:

“—t I’m a kid! Are you familiar with the concept?...”

She held something white, multilayered and heavily perforated under her arm, something that hindered her gesticulation greatly.

“... I need to frolic, play, do sports. Not sit in a coop all day... and

then on sand all night.”

“No way. Decorations are on the list, decorations are approved.”

“The list, the list! Don’t be a machine, come up with something!

What can I help you with? Assemble stuff? Move things?”

“I’ve just finished the remodelling, so, none of that.”

“Then call me once something else comes up...” Thalia sounded progressively more desperate.

Grip poured himself a first glass of water.

“Look, I don’t know,” Stalina waived her arms in exasperation.

“Since you’ve got a suit, you can be the next one to clean the panels.”

“Thank you, thank you! Wanna come with me, Grip?”

“I didn’t mean right now, they’re not—”

Grip wasn’t in the mood to feign enthusiasm:

“Please, have some mercy. I just woke up, what panels...”

“Yeah, sure, text me when you’re free, OK, thank you!” she barraged him, already running away.

Stalina Filantievna shook her head and began to unload her pockets of plenty into the drawers and onto the shelves.

Back in his room, Grip checked the phone. An audio from mom. In a cheerful voice, she told him she had signed up for all the expeditions she could, and got too lazy to cook for herself. Asked to warn her in advance when he’s coming back, so that she cancels everything to be at home. Dropped what was probably a hot piece of local news, Dima Seleznyov breaking his toe against a goalpost; but this only made Grip feel more distanced from this faraway normal life of his that he lived and breathed just

last week. She also mentioned that she saw his speech (one from the Palace of Reconnaissance, presumably), but didn't show it to anyone else. And concluded with a sudden "hope you're not bored there, science can be boring at times". It took an effort for Grip to lower his eyebrow back and shake off that last comment, but he once again opted to not tell anything of importance until he's told it's all declassified. So he promised her that when he'll come back, they'll bake an oven full of cherry pastry together; that the video probably wasn't that great to begin with, so she was right about not showing it to anybody; and that science is being handled by the real scientists, while he's just helping them a little.

He then went to the shower, bumped into Thalia on the way back, got cornered and badgered into joining her solar panel cleaning.

They put on their planet suits, left the ship and went around it along its wall. The ship's side featured a pod docked to it, the outside of it looking criminally ugly and boring for something capable of flying to the orbit right away. Grip just couldn't wait until it stopped blocking the view and revealed a field of solar panels almost the size of the ship itself. The panels stood on thin legs, less than a meter high, each one of them tilted slightly to the left. And there was a cactus: green, plump, higher than the panels, spikeless and heavily chewed up.

Once he was done with the sightseeing, Thalia caught his glance and flicked her wrist, producing two long soft brushes out of thin air. As Grip approached her to grab one, she unfastened and

unsealed the hood-helmet just a bit. He hesitated for a moment, then followed her lead. The bitter air filled his lungs, but he could hear so much better now.

*"What do you think, can Stalina hear us here?"*

*"I don't know, really."*

They went along the panel rows, brushing something dust- or sand-like off them. Not like there was nothing to swipe off, but it was unlikely to seriously impede the panels' performance either.

*"Are you gonna get in trouble? If they find out."*

*"We're the ones formally in charge here, not them."*

*"Are we?"* Grip wondered.

*"At least I rank higher, that's for sure."*

*"And..."* Grip trailed off. *"Why beg for a ball then? If you can just order."*

*"Don't get in my way of forging relationships,"* Thalia laughed and sealed up, and so did Grip, eagerly breathing in good air.

*"OK, let's make an agreement,"* Thalia said a couple of rows later. *"No bringing him in, unless we both agree. No admitting it, unless we both agree."*

*"Deal,"* Grip said in the most serious tone he could muster.

*"So, I thought about it, and I can smuggle him in, but only if he... coope—... sits tight and does nothing stupid!"*

Grip involuntarily glanced at her left hand, as if she was going to flick her wrist and spin a frozen, wide-eyed Newt between her fingers.

*"Bad idea,"* he shook his head. *"That's gonna end with us chasing*

*him all around the base. I also thought, and— We need a cage.”*  
*“Where are we supposed to find a cage?”*  
*“We tell them he asked for a lizard. And a lizard needs a cage.”*  
*“Brilliant!” Thalia admired him. “So simple! Wait, no. What are we gonna do with the other one? Leave it in the dome?”*  
*“Yeah... poor lizard. So we’re gonna chase the other one around the dome.”*  
*“A secret compartment? Under the lid or something?”*  
*“What? No. That also is a bad idea.”*  
*“Whatever, we can iron out the kinks later,” Thalia ended up optimistic.*  
*They sealed up again.*

Another two rows later, Grip suddenly noticed a large lizard peeking from the underside of one of the panels. Grip waved a brush at it; the lizard waved nothing in return. Unsure how to proceed, he just cleaned the row as usual; and the lizard simply retracted itself out of sight once he got closer.

*“Maybe market it as an adventure?” Thalia resumed the conversation.*  
*“Better stress the safety. Including from complex objects.”*  
*“Well... yeah... What I meant, I think he’s a teen, like, he totally acts like one. Tries to dare us. We need to flip it around. Become cooler. Turn a dare into a favour.”*  
*“If we end up doing what he wants, is there— Never mind. There is.”*  
*“You know what, if they have leaders, the previous contact group*

*was likely talking to their leaders. But if Newt is a teen, is he a teen leader? Just a teen?"*

*"A trained diplomat, or a random teen who just wanted to learn an alien language?"*

Thalia snorted, but Grip's hood prevented him from noticing.

*"I don't know," he continued. "That kinda assumes they have leaders in the first place."*

*"OK, next thing, why aren't adults proper?"*

*"No, that's something we can discuss at the base, with Irakli Kosmovich."*

Grip sealed up again. That was the last phrase of the walk; they completed the cleaning and went back in silence, scheming.

Back at the base, Grip made a tough decision to start with the hard part: the report. Just like the last time, he focused on the visit to the dome, and not on what was happening at the base. He detailed his main contribution to science so far: the [juice] sign that was both blood and sky juice now; briefly reported on the fruitless search for [purpose]... Grip divulged nothing on the daring sleepover plan, obviously, but decided to make Thalia happier and left a request at the very end: *"We're working hard, and sometimes we want to have fun. Could the soccer balls' accounting be simplified somehow?"*

Next he visited Maria.

*"... most importantly, this one comes from really hot Faina mountain springs, so, at least at dawn, we don't have to bother with cooling at all. Just give it food and oxygen—"*



"I get it. That's nice, really. Why. Is it. So. Ugly?"

"You only think so, because your brain is wired to stay away from carnivores. I mean, you see these teeth, you know it can bite you hard, so you're subconsciously cautious of them. But that's just you. Since no one eats local lizards, I can guarantee you, they don't share your views."

"Uhh..."

"Think of it, why are you uneasy about carnivores? You're not gonna let it bite Newt anyway, are you?"

"No, of course not, but still... Those hot streams, do any other fish live there?"

"Oh, sure they do. Say, the ones it preys on, give me a second..."

"Yeah, like this! Much nicer."

"It's, like, half your size," Maria spoke softly. "Add water, and it's way too heavy to be carried anywhere."

"And this one?"

"Like, this long, so, much more manageable. Just a large bottle, basically."

Grip caved in with a sigh.

Irakli Kosmovich was checking out something on his phone, and Grip didn't want to startle him.

*"Hello?"*

*"Come in, come in. Time for maths?"*

*"Maths?"*

*"Algebra. According to the reports, you've been studying Russian for two days straight,"* he winked. *"But, I guess, it's time for you to study for real."*

*"Yeah, just a few lizard questions first. What's..." he scribbled down "[do-hold-?]". "... this one?"*

*"Interrogative-imperative mood. Nothing special, really. We don't have it in such a pure form, but compare it with ours 'would you rather study algebra?'. Consider it a 'have it, would you?'"*

*"Aha, OK. Could you also explain, how should we understand this one?" Grip wrote down "[be-proper]"*

*"Look, that's the one you've explained just fine the other day. We used to treat it as 'good', then, as the discrepancies accumulated, we've compromised on 'proper'."*

*"I'm afraid I need more. I need to understand it better."*

*"OK, their concepts don't have to map unambiguously to ours. But I can tell you for sure, this denotes what's something socially acceptable in their culture... following the 'plan', the 'scheme' thing, that will be 'proper'. Yet that's not all to it."*

*"What else? If one takes something by force, would that be 'proper'?"*

*"I don't think so, I'd go with 'strong'," Irakli Kosmovich jotted down "[be-strong]"*

*"Yeah, I know... Can 'proper' mean 'principal'?"*

*"No, and that's way too narrow."*

*"We're not gonna get far this way. Can I have examples with it? When they call various things 'proper'?"*

*"Sure, I..." Irakli Kosmovich scrambled for a second. "Look, how about I do it later? That'd take some time."*

*"OK, let's do algebra."*

Irakli Kosmovich explained how to remove brackets to arrive at polynomials, which was much more straightforward and understandable than lizard. And so was factoring back out. Algebra wasn't paper-worthy: Irakli Kosmovich came up with more and more problems on his phone, Grip solved them on his. Some examples factored nicely, others were a mess, leaving him to wonder whether he's done everything correctly. Irakli Kosmovich has somehow digressed from polynomials and onto Picts and other Celts factoring some things and distributing others, eventually leaving Welsh in a messy state — an impromptu lecture that Grip was about a decade of studies short from understanding in full, yet he found it enjoyable in an abstract way. Also, "Picts" sounded funny.

In the midst of it, Thalia ran in and frowned, ill-tempered:

*"Why haven't you called me?"*

Grip began to defend himself, claiming he didn't promise to. They quickly went over [do-hold-?] and [be-proper] again, and then he sent her off to Maria to check on the fish, since Thalia hasn't seen it yet.

A few problems later, he joined them as well. Thalia and Maria were in sorrow over a grotesque colourful blob on the screen, drifting and slowly morphing in a trippy manner.

*"What happened? This one is even worse."*

*"Yeah, no way,"* Maria ruled and returned the previous picture.

*"Round bottles are out."*

Turns out, they've decided to simulate how Newt will see the fish,

and it was a disaster. Vertical bottles would be bad for checking out from the ground level, and round bottles distorted the fish into a nightmare fuel that even humans had a hard time reconstructing back. Grip was against a large horizontal rectangular bottle with a wide side cap, but Thalia and Maria insisted this was the best idea so far. When asked:

“If we make it this large, just how is it supposed to turn around?”

Grip mumbled:

“Make it just enough to turn around. *It's a tough life for everyone, myself included,*” and left to roam the base alone and get familiar with it at last.

The far side, one past the teleports, wasn't in use, and so was half of this side as well, its sections packed with mysterious equipment. Grip found Thalia's room, with tall white perforated paper-like figurines. Other rooms were hard to match with people, though Irakli's room had papers on the bedside table. And another one turned out to be Maria's, when he was passing it for the third time, and found her sitting on the bed.

The canteen featured Dramatic Lisa once again.

“Why are you so sad?” Grip asked. “Did something happen?”

“No-o,” she stretched out. “I'm not sad. I'm just bored. I'm bored because I have nothing to do.”

“And what do you do? Usually.”

“I'm studying how planets become... the way they are now. Like a historian, but for very slow, astronomically slow processes? Where did all the sand come from?.. Where are the oceans?...”

Grip didn't have the heart to tell her to speak like he was ten, not five.

"... have there ever been any oceans? This kind of questions."

"And what is special about this planet?"

"Nothing! That's the thing, nothing is. There's another planet just like this one, Gamma Echo 6, one we've discovered long ago, studied it down to the tiniest details, and it's very, very similar in almost all the aspects. No axial tilt, no seasons, no weather, no water, just a stupid giant desert. No lizards, by the way, but it's also not as old as Epsilon Indi 3, so, maybe we should just give it time... That is beyond what I'm supposed to study though. So, I already wrote everything I could about this planet, and yeah, the amount of times I've started a sentence with 'just like Gamma Echo 6'..."

"It's better when you're in school. You get questions, you need to give answers."

"Exactly, and after school you need to come up with your own questions. And I've run out of questions."

"Is there nothing else here? For you to study?"

"Well, I'm supposed to study the other planets of this system as well. But they're even more boring, and, most crucially, I don't have the equipment for that. I might be the closest astrophysicist to them, yes, but even the telescope here is a total joke, not to mention everything else I would need for that. I did what I could, but..."

"Can you ask for a bigger one?"

"I did, but they don't approve it. I would need a pretty large one,

and they also know the other planets are boring.”

“So, what are you supposed to study?”

“I don’t know!” she uttered bitterly. “That’s the thing.”

“I don’t know either,” Grip backed off slightly and tried to speak softly. “Have you told this to your... boss?”

“Of course I had.”

“... Have you tried not sending them reports at all?”

“Guess what, that’s exactly my strategy right now,” she smirked.

“Write them a long final report,” Grip suggested. “Put together everything you’ve already written.”

“And top it off with a large red line,” Lisa snorted. “I’M DONE WITH THIS. TAKE ME HOME.”

“Yeah, like this.”

“Eh, sorry, Grip, I didn’t mean to belittle your idea, it’s actually, not a bad idea after all. It’s gonna be real boring though, compiling it... But it would be harder for them to ‘continue observations’ me back if I sent them a... a final report. Thank you, I’ll definitely consider this. And if you find out something about lizard cities, tell me,” she changed the subject abruptly.

“Is this... astrophysics?” Grip wondered.

“No. I’m just being curious. They gotta live somewhere... Listen, if they do send me back at last, what other expert would you rather have instead?”

“I don’t know,” Grip protested. “I have no idea, really. I’m here for only two days.”

“OK, fair.”

And she returned to the same pose she was in before.

Back in his room, Grip attempted to write “[be-proper]” on his thin blanket with a finger, trying to hit it the way Newt parted sand with his tail. The blanket was no sand, though. Dip his tail in something? Give him a pencil? Nah, it’d be easier to learn their speech— Speech! He forgot to tell Irakli Kosmovich that Newt understood their speech!

The piece of news didn’t resonate with the old linguist the way Grip hoped for. It felt like he was so entrenched in a thought it just couldn’t be that way, that he was unnecessarily stubborn and asking to re-check just in case. And unreasonably happy about “sibilants” being indistinguishable after all, even though, like, what a tiny nuance is this? Irakli Kosmovich asked Grip once again to not overwhelm Newt with sentences and the like, and stick to simple distinct words. Finally, he apologized for not gathering the examples yet: *“I’ve searched the transcripts, but now I’ll have to skim through the declassified ones only.”*

Time has almost run out. Grip went to Maria to check on the fish, and found it doubly hideous in person. The bottle was rather small indeed, the air tab let out a thin stream of bubbles. Thalia proudly presented him some flimsy deflector for glow sticks that “guys from above” had helped her design.

The sun was already setting down. They hurried to the dome, got out of their suits, rushed through the inner doors, and that was when Newt dropped on Thalia’s head from above.

Grip didn’t see the fall itself, only caught a glimpse of Newt

on her back, clinging onto the collar of her suit, before Thalia turned to give Grip a thoughtful, detached look. It felt like they were writing a test, locked eyes, and she signalled him “give me a hint!”. And then, a second later, she screamed and ran away.

Grip tried to chase them and help, but, with his very first movement, realized he’s holding a fish tank. So there was nothing else left for him, but to lower it carefully onto the glass floor, watching Thalia run away and Newt bounce frantically against her back. “*Hold on, stand still!*” he shouted, surprised that his words had an effect. As soon as he freed up his arms, he rushed to them, grabbed Newt across the body with both hands, quickly detached him and put him on the glass. Newt immediately ran to the centre, rejoicing, and Thalia headed to the side, where the water tank was.

Fuming and scolding them both with all the linguistic means at his disposal, Grip followed Newt to the centre.

“[exist] [here-in-?] [we’] | [exist] [sun-in-?] [we’]” awaited him. Grip swiftly replied with his hands slightly shaking: “[do-hold] [substance’] [sun-of] | [do-go] [do-hold] [here’]” As Newt ran away to fetch the glowing star, Grip inscribed a large “[do-wait]”, inhaled deeply and walked briskly towards Thalia.

She sat on the glass with her back against the wall.

“*What’s got into you?*” he addressed her from the distance.

“*Running, screaming...*”

“*... acting like a normal kid—*” she raised her head, eyes glinting with mischief.



*“Brilliant, why are you all so brilliant?” he blurted out.  
“—just like you asked me to?” she shifted responsibility.  
“OK, we’re coming back to make amends then, so, sit here.”*

Newt waited for him, a star— ... It was no Newt! Grip blinked in disbelief, but no, he watched him up close for two evenings straight, and this, this was a different lizard. Yes, a small one, even smaller than Newt. A different one.

“[you] | [be-new-?]” Grip wrote, realizing mid-phrase that it could be interpreted in at least three distinct ways.

“[I] [be-new] | [you] [be-new]”

“[go] [here’] [be-first] | [go] [here’] [be-second]” Grip insisted.

“[aforementioned] [can] | [go’] [here’]”

“What?”

Newt just watched him calmly over a star in his mouth.

“[you] [be-first] [go] [ours’] | [you] [be-second-?] [go] [ours’]”

“[true-not]”

“[you] [be-different-?]”

“[I] [be-one] | [I] [be-different-not]”

“*Do you shed skin or what?*” Grip asked aloud.

Newt stared at him the way he always stared at any source of human sounds.

“[you] [be-different-not-?] [inside-in]”

| [you] [be-different-?] [outside-in]”

“[true]”

Grip thought for long enough for Newt to gain initiative:

“[exist-not] [here-in] | [be-second’] [yous-of]” he stated.

“[aforementioned] [think] [you’] [be-danger]”

“[I] [be-danger-?] | [exist-not] [danger]”

Grip erupted:

“[exist] [up-in] [you’] [you] [go] [down’]

| [aforementioned] [be-proper-not] [aforementioned] [be-danger]...”

he wrote in long columns all the way up to Newt.

“[aforementioned] [be-proper] | [aforementioned] [be-danger-not]”

Newt objected without waiting for him to finish.

“[danger]” Grip wrote as one large sign, caught his breath and continued:

“[you] [go] [down’] [exist] [down-in] [you’]

| [you] [can-not] [go’] [can] [exist-not’] [you’]”

“[I] [be-new] [be-strong] | [I] [can] [go’]” Newt objected.

“[exist] [up-in] [you’] [you] [go] [down’] [we-in] [be-danger]”

Grip wrote in one ridiculously long column, erasing the previous writing with the other hand. Newt stared at him, as he nailed it with a second column:

“[exist] [up-in] [you’] [you] [go] [down’] [we-in-not] [be-danger-er]”

and, to illustrate the risks better, knocked his knuckles against the glass. Now that argument punctured Newt’s defensive arrogance alright, he even dropped the star and ran around a little to internalize the blow, as if it actually was the first time he considered the consequences of missing his victim.

“*I was told you’re sentient. Think,*” Grip gloated.

“[true]” Newt admitted once he finished running.

“[you] [go] [down’] [we-in] | [you] [go] [down’] [we-in-not]” Grip cemented his victory of common sense over recklessness. “[you]

| [know-not]”.

“[true]” Newt waved his tail hesitantly, then continued:

“[down-in] [yours-of] [be-danger-er]

| [down-in] [ours-of] [be-danger-er-not]”

*“That’s better. We can work with that. Now let’s go make peace with Thalia. [do-go]”*

“[do-go] | [do-hold]”

*“It’s your turn now!...” Grip began addressing her on approach. Tell this kamikaze to refrain from suicide, against us or against glass.”*

*“Remember how I’ve considered bringing—”*

*“Yeah.”*

*“—I take it back. No way. Cage or it ain’t happening.”*

*“Yeah. Indeed...”*

Grip put Newt down onto the sand nearby.

“[you] [be-danger]” Thalia crawled and wrote towards him.

“[I] | [be-danger-not]”

“[do-go-not] [down’] [I-in]”

“[I] [go-not] [down’] [yours-of]”

“[be-proper]” she pretended to accept his non-apology, and stood up to walk to the centre. Newt followed her on foot, Grip took it as an opportunity to pick up the long-forgotten fish.

The fish just sort of floated in place, barely moving its fins, and still fascinated Newt to no end.

“[aforementioned] [can] [go] [up-in]

| [I] [can-?] [hold’] [aforementioned’]” he asked after a long while.

*“I don’t get it, does he want to take it from us or just touch it?”*

Thalia wondered.

Grip dismissed her question as a rhetorical one: Newt could neither be trusted with a fish, nor touch it.

“[you] [can-not] [hold’] | [exist] [juice’] [sky-of]”

“[can-not-?] [exist’] [inside-in] [I’]”

“[can-not] [exist’] [inside-in] [you’]

| [can-not] [exist’] [outside-in] [aforementioned’]”

“[I] [want] [hold’] [aforementioned’]”

“[you] [can-not] [hold’] [aforementioned’]

| [you] [can] [see’] [aforementioned’]”

“[I] | [understand]”

Once the initial fascination wore off, Newt became more and more active. He prodded the tank walls with his face, dug below it, put his front legs on top of the wall to get a better view and then swiftly climbed onto the top. The fish shied away from him, which only made him more agitated.

That gave Grip an idea.

“[do-go] | [I’]” he wrote and put his hand between the signs.

As Newt climbed the hand, Grip slowly turned it over. Newt fell off onto the sand and stared at the hand, befuddled.

“[exist] [down’] [up-in] | [you] [can] [go’]” Grip wrote.

“[living place] [be-?#3?] | [you] [be-?#3?-not]”

Grip jotted down the sign.

“[do-explain] [be-?#3?]”

“[can] [go’] [?#3?] | [can-not] [go’] [you’]”

*“Smooth, I presume,”* Thalia concluded.

Grip toppled his water bottle and pointed onto it. When Newt climbed it, Grip started turning the bottle around. Newt held to it even if lifted and turned upside down.

“[substance] | [be-?#3?-?]” Grip clarified.

“[true]”

“[I] [go-?] | [living place-in] [sun-of]” Newt asked.

Grip circled the “[living place-in] [sun-of]”.

“[living place-in] [sleep-of] [yours-of]” Newt clarified.

“*Should we?...*” Grip trailed off, unsure whether they were listened to.

“*Caged up, of course,*” Thalia reminded with a dash of eerie vengeance in her voice. “*Not a finger sticking out.*”

Grip nodded in solidarity. Newt’s stunt was all the convincing he needed. That was generous of him to pull it off in advance.

“*Just looking, no interaction, no escapades, there and back, nothing more,*” Thalia continued. *And if that’s not what he hopes for, too bad.*”

“*Sounds boring. He’ll probably want more than just looking,*” Grip stated dryly.

“*Not my problem. Now make it crystal clear, I know you can.*”

“[you] [want-?] [see’] [animal’] [ours-of] [be-different-not] [you’]”

“[true]” Newt was tip-toeing, ready to run in circles again.

“[you] [want] [go] [ours’]”

“[we] [think] [you’] [be-danger]”

Newt didn’t even argue.

“[exist] [up-in] [sun'] [exist] [down-in] [sun']  
[we] [go] [hold] [animal'] [be-different-not] [you']”

Newt gave in and ran a lap before replying:

“[you] [be-proper]”

“[you] [be-proper] [exist] [here-in] [animal'] [you] [go] [ours']”

Newt went for a second lap, but Grip continued:

“[you] [be-proper-not] [you] [go-not] [ours'] [animal] [go] [ours']”

“*Crystal clear indeed,*” Thalia commented approvingly.

“[I] | [be-proper]” Newt either promised or just reminded.

“[you] [be-danger] [you] [go] [yours']

| [you] [be-danger-not] [you] [go] [ours']” Grip continued.

“[I] [be-proper]

| [I] [be-danger-not]” Newt replied.

“[we] [want] [you] [go] [you] [go]

| [we] [want-not] [you] [go-not] [you] [go-not]”

Thalia entered the conversation.

Grip extended his hand to add the missing antestrokes, but changed his mind midway and erased four duplicate signs from the ends of her columns instead.

“[I] | [understand]” Newt assured them.

“*Happy?*” Grip asked Thalia.

“*As good as it gets...*” she replied reluctantly. “*I like what he says, but I've... developed trust issues.*”

Grip hesitated as well, scrambling for words.

“[we] [go] [hold] | [animal'] [inside] [object-of]”

“[true]”

“How do you...” Grip frowned, then followed Newt’s gaze to the

fish tank.

“[exist] [be-many] [living place-in] [ours-of] [objects’] [be-complex] [exist] [inside-in] [object-of] [exist-not] [outside-in] [you’]” he compiled a syntactically questionable explanation.

“[exist] [object-in] [I’] | [exist] [living place-in] [object’]” Newt either agreed or clarified the proper sign usage.

“[exist] [inside-in] [you’] | [exist] [outside-in] [objects’] [be-complex]” Grip didn’t know how to align the columns and gave up.

“[I] | [understand]”

Thalia tapped the “we don’t want, you don’t go” again, Newt wagged his tail above the “I understand”.

*“I hope we’re clear.”*

*“So do I.”*

While Thalia set up her new illumination device, Grip took a break to stretch and drink. They then spent the rest of the evening teaching Newt English. The word selection turned out to be of great importance. It’s all fun and games when the only words you know is

“wait” ([do-wait]) and “go” ([do-go]), but then a “no” ([true-not]), puts a spanner in the works. Phrases like “I go” were peanuts to him, but an overheard “no you” almost made his little head explode. At least Newt overhearing their casual conversations was not something to worry about.

At some point Newt initiated the elaborate goodbye sequence and ran away with the glowing star, requiring nothing this time and not teaching them any sounds in return. Grip and Thalia started

packing up as well.

“So?” Grip asked the most important question.

*“I haven’t made up my mind yet. But let’s prepare. Who knows what else he pulls off... At least he’s done questioning us on the purpose thing.”*

“Good”, Grip admitted uneasily.

*“If we’re bringing a lizard here next time,”* Grip began voicing his concerns carefully, while struggling with his sleeve, *“We’ll also have to think about food and water—”*

*“Why, yes, of course, we’ll need some.”*

*“OK, just something to keep in mind...”* Grip didn’t like something about this part of the plan, or any other part of the plan, for that matter, but he wasn’t able to put it into words in time for them to seal the hoods.

On the way back, Grip couldn’t shake off the feeling that lizards are there, to the side of their path, watching them. But the upgraded glow stick in Thalia’s hand was more of a hindrance than help, the planet suit dampened all the sounds, so maybe it was just his imagination. Yesterday he was sure, today — not so much.

Back at the base, Thalia took the fish and Grip went to the canteen alone. Today there were just Maria and Stalina — either the curiosity waned off, or they came back extremely late today.

“Hello!” they put down their phones. “What’s new?”

“Next time we want a lizard, something similar to him.”



"I've been waiting for that," Maria replied.

"Have you?"

"Yes, I knew you'd ask for it. It was about time. Yeah, so... OK, I already know which one to print."

"It's only logical that, out of all our animals, Newt would be most interested in those most similar to them," Stalina reasoned. "But I'd really love to hear that this would put an end to our station gradually turning into a zoo. And someone would have to care about that lizard."

"I will," Grip assured her. "And Thalia takes the fish."

"OK then," she relented, "We can have a second animal."

"We'll need a large cage," Grip added. "And a larger aquarium for the fish, I guess."

"Yeah," Maria replied, deep in her thoughts. "Something to figure out tomorrow."

"I'll help you with the cage," Thalia appeared out of thin air. "Do lizards shed skin?"

"Yes, sweetie, all the time, just like you," Maria replied absent-mindedly.

"Me?!" Thalia raised her hands to look at them. "Ew."

"Their scales do fall off, yes, profusely, even, but not the way you probably had in mind. Don't expect them gifting you a lizard-sized skin cocoons," Maria awakened from her thoughts.

"And they're not lizards. Why are you asking? Did you see Newt shedding?"

"No, I just... when I saw him today, he looked different from yesterday," Grip replied instead of Thalia.

“Different in?...”

“Body.”

“Huh. He’s still young, isn’t he?.. Yeah. Sorry. No idea.”

“Today Newt has climbed my suit as well,” Thalia changed the topic gleefully.

“Good, sounds like you’re having fun,” Stalina Filantievna dismissed her. “It’s pretty late, fellows, you’d better go. Grip, I’ll come to your room in five minutes.”

“Huh? What for?” he immediately went full-on suspicious.

“Why, a save point, of course. Time flies, it’s been three days already.”

“A say-what?” he asked, befuddled.

Stalina Filantievna looked at him expectantly, so he turned to his partner for support. Except she gawked at him, as if save points were the first topic of “Special agenting 101”. But then again, if they were, Grip never got his copy.

“We’ll be scanning you every three days,” Stalina Filantievna explained. “So that if something happens to you, we can just print you back.”

“But you can already print us back.”

“And explain everything anew? We’ve got a diplomatic mission to run here, it’d be bad enough if you forgot three days of it— all of it. You’ve got unique, valuable experience now, expertise we can’t risk losing.”

“Why not do it every day then?”

“Because the paralysers—” Stalina looked at Maria, expecting her to continue.

“Your body ain’t gonna thank you for that,” Maria didn’t want to go into the details. “Three is already as aggressive as it gets, and one really shouldn’t go lower than that.”

Thalia has left already, but Grip was still processing the new information.

“Should I go to the teleport then?”

“No, no need to, I can carry you there and back, no problem. Just go to your room and prepare for sleep. Once you’re ready, I’ll inject the paralysers. And then you simply wake up tomorrow morning and go on with your day, as if nothing happened. Sounds good?”

“Uh. OK. As you say.”

Back in his room, Grip put everything in place, checked the phone. Somehow he didn’t feel like sleeping any more. Stalina Filantievna appeared soon with a syringe in her hand:

*“Ready?”*

Grip shrugged and laid down on the bed. Closed his eyes, then immediately decided against it. She lowered down next to him and made an injection into his arm. Grip’s body immediately ceased to obey him...



## **(Not) controlled**

... and, seemingly, for the first time on Epsilon Indi 3, Grip saw a dream. Derevyashko, tired and distracted, smiled at Grip nervously and said:

*“Good news, Grip Avdotievich! You’re immortal now.”*

His face then flew out of sight in a surreal, nauseating trajectory. The muted voice continued:

*“Bad news are, if you’re gonna make dying a weekly habit, all you’re gonna do in between is reports. Antifreeze, adrenaline, windmill.”*

His dream boss had a thick, charmingly ridiculous English accent: nobody spoke like this, neither feds nor fists.

“I’m not administering a windmill!” a female voice argued.

Grip lost interest in this ominous lame dream, and the dream has obligingly faded away to let him contemplate what a windmill was. Then he remembered that video. A pre-historic device, yes — an entire house, even, its blades themselves being two-storey

tall. There was some monumental elegance to its radical simplicity: when the wind blows, it spins; when there's no wind, well, not today?

Uptight and focused, Stalina Filantievna bent over to look him in the eye, a syringe ready in her hand. Grip closed his eyes shut just in time to stop the nightmare from developing. He wanted it to go away, he needed to wake up a little, turn to his side, and then he'll have another dream, a better one. Scared, his heart pumping like crazy, he begged his body to raise itself, turn a little and roll to the side; yet his real body ignored his pleas, mocking him back with dizziness. As if there was—no.

No. Grip opened his eyes back, his mind going crystal clear all of a sudden. Not a trace of Stalina, but she was there, she was real, as real as his body, his frantic heartbeat and the hard teleport floor. No, said floor was not flowing, he was, this new feeling wasn't grounded in any movement. It felt as if he climbed a windmill blade, and a gust of wind set it spinning, but it hasn't yet moved enough to the right to turn him upside down. Or at all. Not yet, not ever. The body wanted to fight the spinning as if it was real though. He'd fall and tumble, if he wasn't on the floor already.

*"You're gonna feel better soon," Derevyashko appeared again. "Better at everything but walking, that is."*

*"Walking?"*

Thoughts have always come to Grip's mind one by one, but now a group of five trooped in at once:

*"Right, walk, all while I can't even move."*

*"I'm being dragged to the right. What's there?"*

*"That was no dream."*

*"Like a carousel, but it's only one part of it I get to experience."*

*"What happened?"*

They now cohabited his head, all at once, in a newfound manner that didn't lend itself to thinking about just a single thing at once.

*"You, over there, are you alive?"* Derevyashko inquired.

*"Yes,"* Grip mouthed, realizing he can move after all. He just really, really doesn't want to.

*"Listen carefully, Grip. Time is precious. You died. Most likely, murdered. First thing that springs to mind: who did it?"*

*"What?"* was the only thing Grip could squeeze out.

*"I'm appointing you to investigate your murder. Who wanted you dead?"*

*"What for?"* Grip latched onto one obviously extremely important thought. *"If I'm immortal?"*

*"Focus. Whom do you suspect?"*

*"I don't know."*

*"OK. Fine. At least we've tried,"* he disappeared again. *"Got a place here, where we, could, uh..."*

---

What felt like half an hour later instead of a couple of minutes, Stalina Filantievna carefully lowered Grip onto the canteen's couch and retreated. Dmytro Ivanovich sat on the floor and leaned on the couch.

*"Don't dismiss killing immortals as pointless," he mentored. "Could be done just to stop them from doing something... or sharing something."*

*"And what was I doing?"*

*"You? Sleeping, actually."*

Grip covered his face with his hands to suppress nervous laughter.

*"Enough. Please. Just tell me properly. When did I die. How did I die."*

*"Preliminary conclusion: you have been poisoned. One day after the save point, the next night, you got sick. You woke up, wandered down the hallway, delirious. Then you got even worse, Maria tried to save you and failed, so we printed you anew."*

*"What did I do the day before?"*

After shifting around, Derevyashko started reading:

*"This time we brought Newt a fish. A special kind that lives in warm streams—"*

*"Wait, no," Grip objected, moving slightly. "I do remember that—"*

*"Writing that?"*

*"Wait, no... Doing that."*

*"So, you are writing them the next day," Derevyashko didn't mask his slight disappointment.*

*"It's late. When we come back," Grip answered in short bursts, deep in his thoughts. "We set out at dawn. And then it's late night."*

*"And now you'll have to deal with the consequences," Derevyashko*



stated matter-of-factly.

*"And how am I supposed to?... Deal?..."*

*"Summon every suspect one by one and question them. Look out for inconsis—"*

"No..." Grip interrupted him and lapsed into deep thinking.

"No?" Derevyashko raised an eyebrow.

*"That won't do..."* Grip put it into words carefully. *"I've got to work with them afterwards... Can we summon everyone at once?"*

*"Sure, you're the one in— No,"* Derevyashko remembered something mid-sentence. *"Thalia is out."*

*"What do you mean, 'out'?"*

*"Out there in that... meeting place of yours."*

*"For how long? What's the time, by the way?"*

*"Almost an hour ago,"* Derevyashko consulted his shiny watch.

*"Told me that death is death, but she's got a diplomatic mission to run at dawn. Should we bring her back?"*

Grip shook his head, a move he didn't think through in advance.

*"... No, no. Let her work."*

*"Do you suspect her?"*

*"Thalia? No. Nonsense. Why would she kill me? And poison. An agent like her, you wouldn't even find me."*

*"That may be so,"* Dmytro Ivanovich smiled. *"But it applies the same for everyone."*

*"Everyone here can just stop me with force alone,"* Grip muttered.

*"As long as they wanted to. Maria then? If it was poison."*

*"Maria could do a much better job poisoning you. Got any ideas*

*why make you suffer for half a day first? And go through the hassle of saving you, without saving you in the end. That's sadistic."*

*"Bide time? So that Thalia goes without me?"*

*"Good, you're combining perspectives. Except she could just poison you later. Why do it early at night?"*

*"What is Lisa doing here?" Grip asked after a long silence.*

*"Officially? She's an astrophysicist. For real? I also haven't figured that out yet. Have you?"*

*"No. Do you think she's a spy as well?"*

*Derevyashko let out a short laugh.*

*"Certainly. Everybody is."*

*"Stalina Filantievna?"*

*"... openly and officially."*

*"What is she doing?"*

*"How do I put it? She's a guard. Ensures security."*

*"Irakli Kosmovich?"*

*"Now, he's a scientist first... and a scientist second. Maybe he won't take any action, but he'll report to us anyway."*

*"Why am I investigating this? You're my boss, and you're here, so—"*

*"First of all, by the codex, in cases when it is possible, murders in the line of duty go to the victims."*

*"But why?"*

*"It is a good call. You can know or even just suspect something th—"*

*"I am the only one who remembers nothing from that day!... Night—"*

*"—as opposed to me, who has never ever been here. Also, being the only one out of suspicion—"*

*"Why?"*

*"... Go on."*

*"I mean, could I..."* Grip began hesitantly. *"Could I learn something that I wanted to hide from the others..."*

*"... and it was eating you from the inside, until you were ready to do anything just to forget it, up to and including inventing a novel neurotoxin. And, since you're bad at pharmacology, the neurotoxin turned out really crappy,"* Derevyashko didn't take his theory seriously. *"Nice try, agent, but nope. You're the one who died, you're the one to solve it. And, second, I'm not me. I'm a copy, not your boss."*

Grip squinted at him inquisitively.

*"Keep that in mind in case me and the real me give you contradictory orders."*

Overwhelmed, Grip closed his eyes shut.

*"Okay-y, let's gather everyone... but Thalia. I'll try to make sense out of it, and you'll watch for their reactions and inconsistencies."*

*"Good,"* Dmytro Ivanovich replied from behind his phone.

Stalina Filantievna came in first and assumed a position next to the door. She looked like she pulled a rough all-nighter, but that was nothing compared to Maria. Maria was next

level devastated, barely functioning, fighting sleep with every blink. Next to her, Lisa and Irakli Kosmovich looked just mildly uncomfortable.

“I don’t want to talk to you individually,” Grip began. “We’ll have to work together after it’ll be over. So, let’s just talk like normal people. What did I miss?”

The front row exchanged glances.

“I found you in the hallway after you fell,” Stalina Filantievna began.

“No,” Grip protested. “Before that.”

“I brought you back to your bed after the scan,” she restarted the story. “Next morning you woke up later than usual, walked around the base a little, went to Irakli Kosmovich—”

“Has anybody seen me before that?”

“Maybe I had,” Lisa replied. “Here, you stopped for a refill.”

“With Thalia?”

“No, she was with me, designing the cage,” Maria replied slowly.

“I believe she only joined you at Irakli’s.”

“What were we doing there?”

“You’ve asked for ‘proper’ grapheme usage examples, so I’ve collected some for you,” Irakli Kosmovich replied carefully, matching Maria’s speech cadence.

“Where are they?”

“I don’t know,” he answered after a pause. “You took them with you.”

“Please bring them to me.”

“The papers from your night stand?” Stalina Filantievna clari-

fied.

“Yes. Please.”

Nobody said a word until she returned.

“You had a theory that ‘proper’ means ‘*to govern*,’” Irakli said nervously. “But I don’t find it convincing.”

Grip studied the papers in silence. One of the sheets was new to him, covered in Irakli Kosmovich’s handwriting:

“[help] [be-proper] | [be-together] [be-proper]”

“[want-not] [be-proper-not] | [be-scheme-not] [be-proper-not]”

“[be-wise] [be-proper] [be-strong] [be-proper]  
|[be-strong-not] [be-wise-not] [can] [be-proper]”

“[we] [be-proper]  
|[ours] [be-proper-not] (Irakli Kosmovich’s handwriting: *FYT*)”

“[can] [exist’-?] [be-think] (Grip’s handwriting: *imaginable*)”  
|[be-wise] [you-of] [be-proper]” (some scribbles over it)

“[nature] [be-want] [you-of]  
|[aforementioned] [be-proper] [be-proper-er]”

“[brain] [be-old] [be-proper-?]  
|[exist’-?] [purpose’] [be-olds-of]”

“[brain] [be-old] [be-strong-not]  
|[brain] [be-old] [be-wise]”

“[true] | [be-proper-?]”

“[we] [know-not] | [hold] [choice’]”

“[aforementioned] [be-proper]”  
|[be-want] [be-proper]”

“[we] [show-not] | [aforementioned] [be-proper]”

“[rejoice] [danger] [be-proper-?]”  
|[can-not] [rejoice-not] [be-proper-of]”

“[be-proper] | [be-danger-er]?”  
“[be-danger-er] | [be-interesting-er]”

The examples were hard, but Grip didn't spend much time on the nuances.

The bottom of the page bore two extra notes:

“[?#4?] — *break itself?*”

“[be-scheme-not-?] — *they don't write l. th., but t. underst.*”

Grip put the paper aside.

“Yes, I have shared these examples with him,” Irakli Kosmovich argued defensively, unable to withstand the silence. “There's no context to them, and the secrecy around the protocols is just outright stupid, as the dictionaries are compiled straight off of the same minuscule corpus.”

Nobody was accusing him of anything.

“And then?” Grip asked.

“We've also briefly discussed the implications of phonetic incompatibility... but I don't think it's of any relevance to our current

subject. Then you left..."

"... for the lab," Maria groaned, opening her eyes. "To debate my objectively best pick of the lizard to print and argue with Thalia about cage portability... And then you went back?..." she said with a great deal of doubt in her voice.

"Yeah, he then returned to study algebra," Irakli continued. "... Though that should hold even less relevance," he concluded after a long pause. "And then you went to your room to write a report."

"No, he's stopped by once again... shortly afterwards," Maria recalled. "Thalia shooed him away."

"She what?" Grip didn't understand a key word.

"... told you we'll handle it ourselves... more or less. She spent most of the day in the lab 'helping' me," Maria made an effort to do air quotes, despite trying to move as little as possible otherwise. "At some point around then I sent her away to collect cacti samples, just to get a break from her for a while."

"Collect what again?" Derevyashko asked in his charming accent that just never got old.

"Local flora, lizards eat'em. We've got one right behind the base."

"What for?"

"To compare them to the one Grip brought me the other day."

The story fizzled out in awkward silence. Maria reached out for a phone, Dmytro Ivanovich also checked his. For a minute, she was reading something, before dismissing it with an irritated:

"What kind of freshman wrote this?"

“So! We’ve established you visited the lab once again, and we know you wrote a report,” Dmytro Ivanovich reminded the room. “And then?...”

“Guess what, one last visit to the lab.” Maria let out a tired smile. “But there was nothing to discuss by then, so you just helped Thalia carry the cage away. And then they left for the dome, so, question Thalia from there on.”

“Was there anything wrong with me? When I got back.”

“No, you were mighty fine, pretty excited about that star for some reason,” Lisa replied. “Sorry, but I just can’t remember why exactly.”

“I can,” Stalina Filantievna took over. “Newt brought you the glowing star that you gifted him a while back, and asked why didn’t it work. You explained him it’s not broken, it just needs charging with sunlight, and he decided that he’d leave it in the dome. To charge. Don’t ask me why this is important though. We didn’t talk for long, and you left shortly afterwards. Once again, in order: you return from the dome, bring the lizard to your room, come back here, tell us this story, visit the restroom, and go to your room to sleep.”

The story stalled again, as if nobody wanted to continue. Slightly relieved from both the dizziness and the associated mind clarity, Grip decided to sit down, which turned into another struggle with his own body, but at least he could see everyone comfortably now. Dmytro Ivanovich sat at the other end of the couch.

“And?” Grip asked.



“Stalina was the first to find you,” Maria replied.

“I heard you drop in the hallway,” Stalina Filantievna confirmed. “Looked like you got up, left your room, but you didn’t get far. I found you lying prone just, like, ten meters down the hall? And, uh, you lost your mind, *Grip*. Absentmindedly repeated something like ‘he is he’, but when I tried to put you back on your feet and talk to you, you got loud and started fighting.”

“Fighting is a strong word,” Maria scoffed bitterly. “Fiercely defending from everything that moves or makes a sound... without bothering to sit or stand. Shit wasn’t pretty, scared Thalia away in a split second. I thought you had a mental breakdown or something. I have to remind you once again, I’m no medic.”

“And I have to warn you, *Grip*, that when you’ll see the autopsy, the cause of your death would likely be ‘spinal injury’,” Stalina Filantievna interjected, looking Grip straight in the eyes. “Because hours later, when your condition deteriorated, I snapped your neck.”

Grip tensed up and swallowed involuntarily.

“We need you to understand, Grip,” Maria droned in her tired voice. “You seemed to get better at first, and then you suddenly got much worse. When we’ve scanned you, we found out... your neuroimmune system was fighting hard, so hard, it was killing you. And, by that time, even if we managed to stop it, there could’ve been some serious lasting damage done, and it was safer to just revert you.”

“To kill me,” Grip corrected her, looking Stalina into the eyes.

"To kill you," she nodded calmly.

"And print a healthy you from the night before," Lisa concluded, slightly relieving the confrontation aftertaste.

"And you say this neurotoxin—" Derevyashko began asking something.

"I told you, it's nothing like your beloved neurotoxins," Maria snapped at him. "Shit ain't fit for killing people. Can't even vouch it's lethal for everyone. What, you don't trust me? Fine. Just wait for your lab's report."

"It's running late. And I get it. So, this... unknown chemical. Without any medical terms, how does one get poisoned with it?"

"First you have to come into contact somehow."

"Just touch it?"

"Better put it inside, say, eat it. I'm not sure about this part yet."

"How long does it last?" Grip asked.

"Until... sorry?"

"How long can it lie somewhere... and still work later?"

"I don't know," Maria frowned, unprepared. "I know nothing about its shelf life."

"And for how long can I... carry it, before it starts killing me?"

"Same, that's, essentially, the same question. You can have it on your skin without knowing, and then it gets you."

"It what?"

"For all we know, it can have zero effect on anything besides the immune response... Remember how you touch something hot, and then stick your hand under running water? The threat

is gone, but your body still tries to fight it. Forget it, it was a bad example, I mean, your own body's defence mechanisms panicked, overreacted and decided they must... do everything they could, even if it means killing you."

"Like an allergy?"

"No, a— yes," Maria changed her mind mid-sentence. "Right. A brain allergy."

"Is everyone..."

"... allergic to it? Could be just a small group of people including you, could be everyone, could be anything in between. We don't know, but that one will be easy to test, just give them time."

"So, please answer this," Grip began to formulate a question. "We found something that can kill all of us or some of us, we don't know. It can be anywhere around us, it could be in my ear right now... and if I... turn my head wrong, I'll die again?"

"Eh, not so fast," Maria replied apathetically. "You've just been printed anew, it's not there in the scan. Where would you step into it again?"

"But if it is here, inside the station, won't we all die from it?"

The adults did not subscribe to Grip's alarmism.

"So far we had just one case... you," Maria replied hesitantly.

"Yeah, if we all start dropping like flies, we'll have a bit of a problem. But it's not contagious... not a virus," she reworded again, as Grip frowned. "Even if it can spread around, it won't multiply. Anyway, until we have a second case, I wouldn't worry much about that."

"And if we all get it at the same time?"

“There is a protocol for repopulating the station,” Stalina Filantievna replied. “If that’s what you’re asking about.” Grip paused to think.

“What about Dan and Lee?”

“What about them?” Derevyashko turned to him.

“Could they, uh, come down here... without us knowing—”

Lisa laughed out loud, the others were amused as well.

“What?”

“If you’re implying they could’ve come here to kill you, you shouldn’t worry about that,” Stalina Filantievna shook her head.

“You would’ve never asked if you heard the sound the pods make,” Irakli Kosmovich explained. “It’s so loud, it could’ve raised the dead.”

“I was printed in the orbit and brought down in one,” Dmytro Ivanovich chimed in. “It was loud indeed, and, yeah, I think we can safely dismiss this idea.”

“Is it normal...?”

“I’m yet to see anything normal ’round here,” Derevyashko made an attempt at lightening the room up as Grip got stuck.

“What’s normal, Grip?” Maria asked patiently.

“Is it typical to have a deadly allergy on something new?”

“... on a frontier planet, you mean? Uh, yes and no. Yes, for a newly discovered bioplanet, that wouldn’t be surprising. But not for one we’re living on for a year— granted, our studies on this planet are very limited, we haven’t had a single expedition

approved, and –but we had people go outside, like, daily, for more than a year. And they were fine.”

“That doesn’t explain how did I get it.”

“Precisely.”

“... But I need answers. How did I get it?”

“Beats me. You could try re-enacting everything you did yesterday: touching everything you encounter, licking your fingers, tasting all the cacti you can find, running outside without a suit—”

Grip didn’t find it funny.

“–and not washing your hands when you come back to maximize your chances. Is this what you were asking about?”

“Cacti? Like, the piece I brought you yes—... some days a—?”

“Nah, can’t be it. I’ve scanned it, remember? Cacti, flies, lizards, none of them contain or produce this—”

“Lizards?” Grip raised his voice, wide-eyed. “Wait, you...?”

Maria let out a deep sigh.

“We’ve scanned a lizard once, yes,” she admitted reluctantly.

“Caught it, froze it, scanned it, released it. In our defence, back then we didn’t know they could be sentient.”

“Could be?” Grip echoed.

“U-ugh,” Maria groaned, taking a pause to focus. “Yes. We have no reason to believe the one we’ve caught is sentient. And the lizards never brought that incident up.”

The silence was tense. Dmytro Ivanovich embodied disapproval of all the mess happening around here, Irakli Kosmovich looked attentive and sad; Lisa stared at a wall; Stalina did her thing

again, observing and waiting for something to happen, like when Thalia mocked her earlier; while Maria looked like she gave up caring about everything.

“Don’t worry about your secrets,” Grip told her. “If you don’t want me to know, *Stalina Filantievna* can always break my neck again.”

“Grip!” Derevyashko raised his voice at him.

Lisa just froze, Irakli Kosmovich shook his head disapprovingly, Maria looked repulsed and indignant, and Stalina Filantievna gave him just a short resentful glance. As if she wasn’t that happy about snapping kids’ necks herself.

“... I’m sorry,” Grip addressed Stalina.

She didn’t pay him another look.

“I don’t want to return to my room,” Grip said. “I’m afraid I can get it again.”

“Should I clean it?” Stalina looked him in the eyes again, as if nothing happened.

“No!” Grip protested. “Can you first scan it?”

“It’s large,” she expressed her doubts, “and that chemical we’re looking for is not easy to detect, is it?”

“It’s anything but,” Maria confirmed. “Fine only.”

“I can scan selectively, here and there,” Stalina suggested with hesitation. “Got any ideas on which places should I check?”

“No, not really, no.”

“And yeah, I can find you a new room. And one for you as well.” she nodded at Dmytro Ivanovich.

Grip squirmed in place, apparently hoping that if the clarity has almost evaporated, so has (not) being dragged rightwards.

“Is there a... thing to prevent it from killing me?”

“Yes,” Maria replied. “Potent stuff— it ain’t great, but it’ll get better with time. If only I’ve acted earlier, I could’ve shut it down and save you. We can do it right now, if you want to.”

“But I’ll—”

“—lose the immunity to all the other stuff, yes, you have it for a reason. The good news are, we’ll receive new samples pretty much every day, until, like, a week later, they arrive at a perfectly safe one, protecting you from just this thing alone.”

“So, I just need to survive for a few days,” Grip summed it up and scanned the room.

Maria lost a battle to a yawn. Lisa had her head stuck firmly in the clouds.

“Lisa, you didn’t talk much. What were you doing yesterday?” She flinched and turned to Grip.

“Me, uh, I can tell you what I wasn’t doing: writing my report. I decided to follow your advice, about the final report, and so far I’ve successfully avoided doing just that. I was lying here, where you are, then in my room, then came back. After lunch, I began to put together a table of contents, so I started re-reading some of my previous reports, found a couple of small mistakes, read some other stuff, and, long story short, I still haven’t got to, actually, writing, not even today... I don’t know what else to tell you, we haven’t interacted much ye— that day... just like most of

the other days.”

“Mmm, OK.”

Grip decided to stand up; Stalina stepped towards him, ready to catch him if he falls:

“Where are you going?”

“Thank you for trying to save my life,” he frowned and grabbed onto the couch. “I don’t think you wanted to kill me. I’ll go talk with Thalia next.”

“Are you sure? You can just wait for her,” Derevyashko didn’t insist though.

“No, I’m fine,” Grip stated and began walking away immediately, mostly to back his claim with not falling down from standing still too long.

“Well, you’re all free to go then,” Derevyashko continued behind his back. “Go get some sleep,” he singled out someone in a lower tone.

The body obeyed Grip just fine, but he had to learn to ignore everything it lied to him about and keep moving. Fiddling with the planet suit was the hardest part of it all. Walking, surprisingly, was the easiest one. It was dark already, the dome featured no lights, but Grip found it with ease. As the inner doors slid open, he saw the cage. And Thalia running towards him.

The cage was larger than he expected. Handles in the front and in the back, a large lid, more perforated towards the top, more transparent towards the bottom, some attachments, sand tilted



towards the back... Must be really heavy—

Thalia ran up to Grip and briefly hugged him, making him freeze for a few seconds. Newt was catching up to them, rattling something energetically, but they didn't listen. Grip sat down to fight his way out of the planet suit.

"You're alright," Thalia stated.

"Yeah."

"From the save point?"

"Yeah," Grip nodded, confirming he was restored.

"OK, so," Thalia took that as an invitation and opened the flood-gates. *"I woke up early, didn't wake you up that day. Nothing strange about the morning, save for Stalina handing me a ball out of nowhere. And what for? So that I bugged off? I only needed that to get away—"*

*"That was my work,"* Grip surprised her. *"Doesn't matter. Go on."*

*"Went to Maria, explained what do I want in a cage over ice cream,"* Thalia went full auto again. *"She said that when lizards finally get around to visit us, we're gonna carry them in this cage, and she's gonna film a historical video, so I had to joke that lizards are sentient and must sit on our shoulders, that'd be even better. I don't think she suspected anything."*

They headed towards the centre, where a glowing star awaited them at the glass-sand border. Newt gave up his clattering and just followed in silence. Thalia noticed Grip looking at him and switched subjects:

*"By the way, he did tear my suit the day before yesterday, here, on*

*the back.”*

*“How’s he doing?”*

*“He’s excited... he hasn’t understood a thing. Let’s go in order.”*

*“Yeah, sure.”*

*“You wrote me from Irakli’s, he said all his texts are contact group transcripts, so we can’t read them, because we need to be a blank slate, and this is bullshit, because he read them all and understood nothing, so you don’t stand a chance, and a handful of examples won’t make us fall into the same rut—”* she let out another barrage, making Grip smile involuntarily.

She tried so hard to work the recently learned word “*rut*” into the sentence, yet, at the same time, iotated the last sound like an exemplary Fist spy she was, laying down some thick phonetic basis for an arrest.

*“—so he did share some ‘proper’ usage with us, and you had an idea that ‘proper’ meant ‘ruling’, as in ‘to rule’, which is stupid,”* she continued. *“Even though I myself told you contactees must be of a high rank, it just doesn’t—”*

Grip got briefly distracted to sit down and to draw a large “[do-wait]” on the sand.

*“I saw it, cut to the chase.”*

*“Uh... And told us to make up new ‘sky juice’s, because otherwise we’re not gonna get far without borrowing words,”* she accelerated again. *“Then, at the lab, you wanted a ‘visually similar’ lizard, and we wanted an accli-ma-tized one, discussed the cage, then studied, then came back again. I dropped you a hint that you should not come check up on it this often, but I basically*

*lived that day at the lab, as if I was bored, even wrote my reports there,” she started slowing down at last. “Got so tired of me, she even sent me to gather cacti. You also left to write a report, then we were done printing and I went to collect sand, then you were done, and we carried the lizard here. That’s also when you stopped worrying, by the way, I thought it’d be worse.”*

*“What do you mean, ‘it’d be worse’?” Grip stared at her.*

*“You know, that you’ll be worrying so much it’d be telling. And you got real calm all of a sudden.”*

*“Am I not calm all the time?” he inquired.*

*“So, when we carried the lizard here,” Thalia evaded the question.*

*“Newt brought the glowing star, he took it underground for the day, and it went off, so he thought it was broken, get it? You explained it, and he said he’ll charge it here, in the dome. Why here though? So that the others don’t take it away from him or what?”*

*Even though she slowed down, Newt gave up on listening and lay down. Grip also didn’t know why leave it here, so she continued: “Newt checked out the lizard, told us he understands why we think it’s similar, but it totally isn’t. He knows better anyway. We then agreed we’re doing it, told him he must behave and sound like a stupid lizard, and then we’ll do it. He started rejoicing, and here’s where you’ve really aced it: you told him that if he clicks or rejoices, he’d be telling the adults it’s him and he’s here! That worked wonders, he wrote that it’d be very much improper of him and shut up for the entire day! By the way, you asked him about rejoicing, and he said it’s for either*

*being proper yourself, or for seeing or knowing somebody else is proper, and that it's not a tradition, but nature, but he'll be quiet. And he really was."*

*"Not a tradition...?"*

*"But nature. Anyway, it was time to switch them. We didn't know where to— ah, you two were drawing, so that you could ask Newt whether the dome is a sphere, and he said it is, because otherwise why would he use the airlock. Yes... Yeah, so we just left it here, because where is it gonna go, and Newt told us he'll help us catch it later, so, yeah, I put Newt in my suit behind my neck, because we thought that if we take the lid off it's so gonna run away, and it was just like 'what do you want from me, leave me alone', so that was a little fight, but it didn't bite through— wait, what about you?"*

*"What about me?"*

They went to check Grip's planet suit; the gloves were scratched, but not punctured.

*"... yeah... We left it some water, and those grasshoppers, I just dumped them other there, hope that worked out..."*

Grip stopped to check out the cage. There indeed was a distressed lizard there, ignoring them, its head very different from Newt's.

*"We put Newt in and went straight to your room. There were just Stalina and Lisa staying up, you rambled on that glowing star for ages and then told us you're going to bed. I also followed shortly after, to my room I mean, though I was curious..."*

They walked back to the centre in silence.

*“Right, and then you got sick at night, you moaned, fought back, Stalina told us you kept saying ”he’s here”... But I’m not gonna take it for consent to tell them everything! You– back then...”*

Grip nodded back, Thalia relaxed a bit.

*“When Stalina carried you to Maria, I checked up on Newt briefly–”*

*“And?”*

*“And he just sat there in the cage, quiet. I think that’s also when they called Derevyashko, because Stalina then told us to stay in our sections and refrain from all communications. I was terrified they’ll never let me carry Newt back, tried to come up with something... Then Stalina wrote that you’ve got worse; then — that you died; then Derevyashko flew down, tired and furious, suspected everyone, myself included, told me I poisoned you wrong, then told me the poison was bad; no motive, no means, same as everyone else, I guess. I was up the wall by the time, but I really couldn’t think of anything better, so I just wrote him, right at dawn, that I’m sad about you and everything, but a mission is a mission, we have an appointment, and I’m going no matter what.”*

*“Thank you very much,”* Grip nodded. *“For... not contriving anything else.”*

*“I, uh... He wasn’t thrilled at all, but he’s got nothing on me, and in the end he even helped me carry Newt to the airlock himself. And then I dragged it all the way to the dome. Yeah.*

Grip expected her to continue.

*“Right. Then I let Newt out, he rejoiced for a long while, said he*

*understood nothing, but it was very interesting, that he wanted to see everything but saw almost nothing, that he can't see great at all, but it was still interesting, that we really showed him the living place we sleep in, that you didn't sleep, then you did, even though the sun was down, and then you left, then adults came in, and he was quiet, so that they don't recognize him... He also rejoiced about Derevyashko carrying him and not recognizing him— though this guy wouldn't recognize him even if he learned to say 'Newt'. He asked why I'm alone and where's the second one, I told him you can't come today. I didn't tell him you died, cause, like, how would I then explain that you're alive again? Then we chased the lizard—"*

*"We?"*

*"Yes. Thank cosmos it didn't dig down, otherwise I have no idea what would I do. And that it didn't escape in general. It actually just sat there, in the water's shadow, but I blew it, so we had to chase it all over the dome, Newt drove it onto the glass and to the wall and I caught it there. Smashed my knees though," she gestured towards her knees, with the suit visibly dirty.*

*Grip looked at Newt, Newt was clearly bored.*

*"Wait, you said you put Newt inside your suit the first time."*

*"Yeah, so that they don't fight each other... and he doesn't do anything stupid in general."*

*"And now you're saying you're chasing the lizard together? Without the suit?"*

*"I know, it doesn't make much sense, but now I just couldn't care less. Besides, we— I already knew it ain't assaulting us as soon as*

*we give it a chance. And I'm not sure I'd catch it without Newt. Then we all drank—*

*"We?"*

*"Me, Newt, and the lizard. Tell me, do you already know what's the poison?"*

*"Not so fast. No, I don't. I mean, they still don't know where it came from. Let me question the last suspect first."*

Grip turned to Newt and raised his finger invitingly.

*"A suspect?"*

*"A witness, at the very least."*

*"I don't think he could see much..."*

*"[you] [see] | [do-show] [aforementioned]"* Grip wrote with little regard to the rules.

*"No light today,"* Thalia said regretfully.

*"We'll manage. Especially if he clicks."*

*"[exist] [you'] | [you] [see]"* Newt wrote after a short while.

*"[exist] [be-together] [I'] [I] [know]"*

*"[exist-not] [be-together-not] [I'] [I] [know-not]"*

Grip continued the sloppiness.

Newt froze in place.

*"[exist] [down-in] [sun'] | [you] [sleep] [living place-in]"* Grip wrote upside down towards himself, as if there was someone else talking to him, and encouraged Newt to continue with a slide of a finger above the sand.

*"[exist] [inside-in] [I'] | [I] [see-not] [you']"*

Grip didn't react, deep in his thoughts, and Newt followed up

with:

“[you] [sleep-not] [go] | [I] [sleep-not] [go-not]”

Another pause, another slide of encouragement from Grip.

“[exist] [sounds’] [be-strong] | [I] [want-not] [aforementioned’]”

“Pods,” Thalia has stated confidently. “[sound] [be-first] | [sound] [be-second-?]”

“[two]” Newt replied.

*“Wait-wait-wait, I don’t get it. Why two sounds?”*

*“That’s fine. One with Derevyashko, and one sent up to even it out. So that we have two down here.”*

Grip kept waiting until Newt ran outwards and continued inwards:

“[exist-not] [you’]

| [exist] [be-olds’]”

Grip tapped the sand impatiently, prompting Newt to run closer at first to see what’s happening. He then understood there won’t be new writing or anything and wrapped it up:

“[exist] [living place-in] [you-of] [I’]

| [exist] [living place-in] [here-in] [I’]”

Grip started composing something, re-imagining and amending it on the fly:

“[exist] [living place-in] [I-of] [danger’]

| [you] [know-?] [danger’] [aforementioned]”

Newt started running before replying:

“[I] [know-not] [danger’]

| [exist-?] [inside-in] [danger’]”

*“Could it get into the cage?”* Thalia asked, worried.



*"I don't know."*

*"How do we make sure?"*

*"Let's scan the cage,"* Grip decided after a brief pause. *"If it's not there, it's not there. [we] | [know-not]"*

*"[exist] [inside-in] | [exist-not] [danger']"* Newt replied.

Thalia twiddled nervously. Grip stared at all the recent writing, lips pursed.

*"[I] [can-?] [go']"* Newt asked after a while.

*"Can he?"*

*"He had a long day,"* Grip replied, his hand already writing the same old:

*"[exist] [up-in] [sun'] [exist] [down-in] [sun']*

*| [exist-not] [here-in] [we'] [exist] [here-in] [we']"*

*"[exist] [up-in] [sun'] [exist] [down-in] [sun']*

*| [exist-not] [here-in] [I'] [exist] [here-in] [I']"* Newt didn't wait for his turn, finished earlier and used the spare time to add: *"[yous] [be-proper] | [I] [be-proper]"* before running away.

*"At least he liked it,"* Grip stood up with Thalia's help.

*"Now I'm really worried about the cage's, uh, protection,"* Thalia sighed. *"What have we learned about it?"*

*"It's not a virus, it's some other small thing that can be anywhere, like, on your skin, and then it gets inside, and your brain has an allergy. At least mine has."*

*"And what about a cure?"*

*"Sorta, there will be one soon. The kind to take in advance. There is one, it's dangerous, but they'll send us something better."*

The cage was surprisingly light, as if sand was the only heavy part of it. Thalia offered to drag it back alone, but Grip actually felt more stable when carrying it. Back on the ship they brought the cage straight to the lab, but Maria wasn't there, so they just left it inside by the entrance, all in silence. Thalia left for her room, Grip went to the canteen, and took a seat across Dmytro Ivanovich.

*"And where's Maria?"*

*"Sleeping. Should we wake her up?"*

*"... no, no rush,"* Grip took long pauses to think everything through. *"We brought a cage, it also was in my room. We need to scan it."*

*"I'll pass it along. What do you think?"*

*"Could it be so that lizards aren't sentient, but it's mushrooms in their heads that are?"*

*"Could it be so that you need to get some sleep?"* Derevyashko asked calmly. *"You... relapsing already or what? Leave sentient mushrooms to Maria, I'm asking what do you think of your murder?"*

*"Come on, nobody has a reason to kill me. Must be an accident."*

*"Sure. Touched something nasty and scratched your nose, happens to the best of us. Have you washed your hands?"*

Grip left reluctantly.

*"OK, now let's get serious,"* Dmytro Ivanovich continued when Grip returned.

*"I am dead serious. Stupid way to kill me, plus nobody gains*

*anything.”*

*“Thalia got some time with the lizards.”*

*“Have you printed me earlier, she wouldn’t even get that.”*

*“What if you learned something—”*

*“What do I know that Thalia doesn’t?”*

*“—and threatened to tell the world—”*

*“Should’ve then printed me back and pretended nothing happened.”*

*“OK, wow, we’ve got a mastermind on our hands,” Derevyashko replied, masking his fascination with mockery. “Let me see, you’d need just about everyone in cahoots, myself included... Reports— thirty k of energy, among other things... OK, breathe easy, I don’t know either. If labs back Maria’s claims, it does look like an improbable accident then. I’m unsure about Thalia, but others don’t lie. Omit — yes, divulge too much — also yes,” he smiled. “But they don’t lie. Looks like I’ve hopped here just to write one very expensive report about you scratching your nose the worst way ever imaginable, before disincarnating.”*

Grip let out a relieved smile.

*“Speaking of which, let me vent to you a little,” Derevyashko continued.*

Grip shifted pose again, all ears.

*“That’s the first time I split up... I always knew it’s a horrible idea, that I never want to and never should, and then it turned out precisely like I thought, you know, because it is what I thought, and what I am thinking now,” he scoffed bitterly. “Didn’t want to, never planned to. It was just a bad day. I’m on edge already,*

leading one agent through, then we lose connection to another one. Full alert, do we assemble a team or not, do we even need an extraction— and then I'm told you had a mental breakdown and lost your mind. I'm gonna be honest with you, I was dismissive at first. Thought you'd just come to senses or something, and then Aksat— Aksat Dzhonatanovich barges in, all like: 'you still here? drop everything, your envoy's been poisoned!'. So I, OK, not dropped, more like threw my phone at him: 'what am I gonna do, tear myself in half?', and, wait for it, that smug poser catches it, pretends like he's checking it: 'funny you should ask, look at all these clearances', imagine that? They didn't let me do anything before the scan—"

Grip nodded with extra compassion.

"—and now I'm here, and all those problems are suddenly no longer my problems, and so is my son, and my wife, and my entire little life. And it's not like anything changed... nothing has, but... the knowledge that I'm not real, just an empty shell with a single function left — write a report... So, spetsnaz-copies? Do not recommend, wholeheartedly, that whole concept is sick in the head."

"... well, not like I'm being offered to..."

"You've got all your life ahead, so..." Dmytro Ivanovich trailed off. "Sorry for getting carried away, and thanks for listening me vent."

"Nah, no problem. I don't mind, really. I'd go to bed actually, but I don't know where to."

"Ah... and what are you waiting for? Just ask Stalina— wait, I'm

*gonna ask her..." he reached out for the phone. "I've got the same..."*

*"Yeah, and please, don't get carried away with the immortality,"* he returned to the conversation.

*"No, no, I don't plan to. I take it, it was super unpleasant to, uh, past me—"*

*"Exactly."*

*"—but I can't promise to not die, until I'm getting told, like, what exactly am I supposed to avoid!"* Grip waved his hands in the air.

*"Yeah, good enough for me."*

*"Let's go, boys,"* Stalina spoke up from the door frame.

*"Don't worry, Grip, nobody's blaming you. We are worrying about you. Just do what's in your hands."*

She led both of them beyond the teleports. Another bland room, another huge bed. *"Let's sleep on it,"* Grip muttered, as he was scaling it, then lied on his back, processing two days for one.



## **(Not) entrusted**

The phone was missing altogether, as was the night stand. Even without a clock, it was clear as day though: the resurrection threw Grip's struggling sleep pattern out of the window.

He picked the suit from the footboard and trudged to the shower to come to senses, change into clean clothes and wash off that deadly substance that could be anywhere. On his way back Grip peeked into the canteen. Irakli Kosmovich put down the tube and smiled back.

*"Banana?"*

*"Good morning. Banana."*

*"Banana!"*

Grip dove into the drawer, fetching a yellow one for himself.

*"Guess we'll have to do powers again..."* Irakli stated.

*"... algebra?"*

*"Yeah, algebra."*

*"Give me, like, fifteen minutes? Who knows what extra paper-*

*work awaits me.”*

“What’s Derevyashko here for, if not paperwork?” Irakli grunted.

*“Make him do it for you.”*

Grip left uplifted and content.

He tiptoed into his previous room to carefully pick up the phone, full to the brim with documents Maria has forwarded. Here’s a wall of text in incomprehensible English... here’s a shorter one, with highlights and comments. Grip reluctantly turned the translator on and frowned, toggling it back and forth...

*... has discovered well-studied, understudied and unknown microorganisms (M. Stinner: same as the last scan, for you and Thalia alike) incapable of inducing a sustained autoimmune reaction.*

*Reverse simulation of the early stage of the autoimmune reaction suggests an asymmetric development profile with the origin tracing back to the left ear, left nostril or one of the root canals.*

*Identification, synthesis and reintroduction largely confirms the originally defined symptomatology.*

*Suggested effect under immune suppression (simulated): neural inhibition (M. Stinner: of what?) of low intensity. Onset symptoms: fatigue, constipation, drowsiness.*

The next report was impenetrable even with the translator. Grip gave up after it dawned on him that the titular “agent” referred



to neither him nor the poison, but some other substance with an unpronounceable mess for a name.

The string of forwarded documents was topped off with a message: “come to the lab, I’ll explain it”. An offer Grip gladly took.

He managed to catch a glimpse of something disorienting bright red and green— must’ve been false colours —on Maria’s screen before she noticed him and flinched the picture close. The cage wasn’t there.

“How’re you feeling?”

“Fatigued, drowsy, not constipated,” Grip flaunted new words at her.

“So, you’ve read that one already,” she smiled, amused. “Have you understood the rest?”

“Almost nothing, to be honest.”

“It’s simple, really. That thing you’ve overreacted to the day before is otherwise harmless for you, almost certainly harmless...”

Dmytro Ivanovich appeared at the door frame. Grip waved at him, and so did Maria.

“... whom it does affect though, is lizards, but the effect is a rather mild one. Like, two glasses of wine would have on him,” she tilted her head at Derevyashko: “A long shot from being lethal.” She let out a string of impressive-sounding terms that... probably described the effect on wine on adults, in scientific English?

“Local lizards?” Grip nodded as if he understood it all.

“Of course.”

Derevyashko stepped closer, moved by the scientific mini-convent unfolding in front of him.

“We haven’t figured out— largely, because we haven’t done much at all —where have you managed to run into it. Could you breathe it in with the local air?”

“Huh?”

“Have you ventured outside without your suit on?”

“Why?.. Although... I can’t be sure, I...”

“???”

“... don’t remember, like, a day and a half?”

“Oh,” Maria accepted the argument. “Right. I should be asking Thalia. Although, she would’ve mentioned that. Anyway, about these reports. They still haven’t told me how typical the response is, but they’ve sent in the first targeted suppressant.”

“Suppressant?”

“I inject it, you stop reacting so violently. To that thing, and millions of other ones, but not all of them.”

Grip wasn’t comfortable with her holding something back.

“... Thanks, but, you said there will be a better one? I think I’ll wait for a better one.”

“As you wish. Worst case, we print another you,” Maria answered calmly.

“So, was he the only test subject so far?” Dmytro Ivanovich asked offhandedly.

“Wait, was it tested on me?”

“Yeah, that’s what I said.”

“They’ve printed more copies of me? Just to test this thing?”

“Not the full copies, no. A brain and some spine should suffice, shouldn’t they?” Derevyashko looked at Maria, expecting a confirmation. “Sure there’s no use in printing legs to test the neuroimmune response.”

Maria stared at him disapprovingly, but did not object.

“So, any ideas where you caught it?”

“No, nobody mentioned any new substances. Besides, how would I know? If it’s microscopic—”

“It sure is,” Maria interjected. “Scanning the cage takes ages.”

“Good, because when our gecko ran away last night—”

“Have you let it out?” Derevyashko inquired.

“Yeah.”

“What for?” Maria went nervous.

“The oth—the ambassador wanted to touch it.”

“Good cosmos, touch it?”

“Yes... that’s why we asked for a lizard! He wanted to touch a fish, but couldn’t.”

Maria grabbed her head.

“Has it?”

“What?”

“Touched it. Have you seen them come into contact?”

“No, I was here. When I came to the dome last night, it was in the cage.”

“Why though? I should’ve thought that scenario through...”

“Why not? It’s harmless, isn’t it? Unlike that fish— have you seen its teeth? We need to keep him interested, that’s why we’re

here”.

This explanation calmed Maria down a notch, but made Derevyashko tense up and frown.

“Do not put the health of... the ambassador... at risk,” Maria told Grip off with her energy evaporating as she spoke. “What am I gonna do then? Please, just don’t,” she almost begged him.

“Oh, have I told you about that time our ambassador decided to fall down?”

“What? No,” Dmytro Ivanovich leaned closer.

Maria’s emotional rollercoaster ran out of energy, so she just stared at them with distrust and disapproval.

“So, we come in, and instead of just coming in from their side, like he always does, he falls from above! On Thalia’s head! She jumps around, starts running, I take him off, and he’s like, ‘isn’t it fun?’. It sure wasn’t for her!”

“Fun? Do they even have a word for ‘fun’?”

“Oh, trust me, he was having fun. You should have seen his face.”

“And, forgive me for asking, but where exactly can I find this in your reports?”

“Forgiven. And, I’m, like, explaining to him that he can get hurt this way, and he’s all: ‘no, I’m strong’. I spent, like, half an hour explaining that the floor is hard, and it’s gonna... get injured.”

“I’m serious, Grip, we need this kind of things reported. Half an hour, and not a single word?”

“That’s what happens when you recruit a *valenok*,” Grip parried.

“OK, OK, next time I will write it.”

Derevyashko’s expression made it clear that joking is not an

answer, and he'll remember that.

"So, if something happens to Newt, it's because of our lizard.

Noted," Maria mumbled, staring at the corner of the room.

Grip followed her gaze to a "jar" with the lizard, immobile. OK, not really a jar. It was more horizontal than vertical, yet still not long enough for it to stretch the tail out.

"That's our—?"

"Yeah."

Grip knocked on the glass, the lizard rolled its eyes towards him.

"Is it alright?"

"Yeah. Maybe slightly cold."

"They like heat, right? Like, outside?"

"That's why we picked it, remember? Don't expect much activity from it."

"Understood. No songs then."

"Songs?"

"After those glasses of wine."

"It really isn't obvious when you're joking, and when it's just your normal chaos going on," Dmytro Ivanovich complained.

"You got it all wrong, it's the local ones who—" Maria began.

Grip spotted Thalia in the hallway.

"Good morning! How are your knees?"

"I'll be fine," she intoned dismissively.

Again, it was impossible to tell through the suit.

"I was telling them how you were catching the lizard," Grip continued. "But you were there, so you can tell it better."

“He’s also told us how you got ambushed from above,” Derevyashko interjected. “Has that really happened?”

“Of course it has. It’s all there in my reports.”

“And what do you think he was after?” Derevyashko asked.

“Me? I think he’s acting stupid. He’s a kid.”

Grip nodded along in agreement.

“Grip said he wanted to touch our lizard—” Maria continued.

“—and the fish—”

“—has it?”

“No. I’m pretty sure he hasn’t. When I’ve put it out, it ran away. When we’ve put it back, Newt helped, but from a distance.”

“I expected better from you than to set up a lizard fight,” Maria was disappointed.

“Fight? There was no fight. A chase, merely. Nobody touched anyone.”

“Well, we had,” Grip objected.

“We’ve been doing it all the time and it was fine. It was his idea to climb you.”

“And falling on you.”

“That sure wasn’t my idea. If he misses next time, that’s on him.”

“Hope you’ll make him refrain from falling onto hard flooring. Failure to do so could mark the downfall of your diplomatic mission.” Maria said dryly.

“Grip was rather clear about it,” Thalia knocked on the table, smiling, and noticed the lizard.

“How did he do that anyway? Where would they practice?”

“They must be falling at each other from those cacti I keep

hearing about,” Derevyashko suggested.  
Maria winced and refrained from commenting.  
“If our strong friend doesn’t want to become flat, he’d think better next time,” Grip summarized.

“Why is it here?” Thalia pointed at a lizard in a jar.

“I’m still scanning the cage,” Maria replied.

“Tell me when you’re done,” Grip asked.

“Sure.”

“OK, and I think... *I’m gonna leave now, fill the gaps in my algebra knowledge.*”

Derevyashko wasn’t done though:

“Grip came up with a curious theory last night,” he began. “That lizards themselves aren’t sentient, it’s mushrooms in their brains that are.”

“—yeah, Miyamoto’s hypothesis,” Maria nodded.

Grip buried his face in his hands, while she continued:

“Explains why some lizards are sentient and some are not and... not much more. Unless you’ve found new evidence that backs...” She trailed off, as Grip gave her a confused look, and started all over, slower:

“Like, what’s our issue with lizards being sentient? It’s twofold: how come lizards are sentient, and how come only some lizards are sentient. Mushrooms, if we were to discover them, would answer the second question, but exacerbate the first— make it worse and raise some more, —because now we’ll have to explain sentient mushrooms. It’s bad enough that lizards have small

brains and, seemingly, no big problems to solve. Mushrooms would be even smaller—”

“Mushrooms are large, actually,” Grip objected with vigor.

“Mushrooms are all connected underground, so they are actually one large—”

“They sure are, but are lizards connected?”

“Like, do they? ... Have telepathy?”

“I mean, everything’s possible. I don’t know. Ask them.”

Maria decided to have some mercy on his theory. “Professor Miyamoto’s hypothesis wasn’t actually about mushrooms... Mushrooms are a bad fit, anyway.”

“But can they? Grow in brains? I’ve read that they can.”

“Yes, they can, but their... uh... see, mushrooms aren’t exactly famous for their folklore, geometry knowledge or analytical abilities. Until you’ve got facts to back it, that theory raises so many new questions, while answering just one, so forgive me for sticking to the plain bland multispecies theory: brainier lizards living among their distant non-sentient relatives.”

“So, that makes us the aliens struggling to tell humans apart from monkeys?” Dmytro Ivanovich nodded.

“Homo sapiens from all the other homo.”

“Easy, humans live in cities,” Thalia remarked.

“Lizards don’t have to live separately.”

“How is that a problem,” Grip mumbled absentmindedly.

“Lizards have tails and we don’t. Can I go now?”

“I won’t delay you any further, professor Miyamoto,” Derevyashko mixed mockery with respect.



Thalia tagged along.

*"I'll come to you, but later,"* Grip said. *"We've got no plan, nothing."*

*"Just a ball,"* she muttered and took a right turn shortly after.

Grip finally came to study powers for the second time. Irakli Kosmovich dug the phone out of the paper piles, explained what do the cutesy small digits mean, and they ran through the problems he already had at hand. Once Grip made a mistake, Irakli Kosmovich paused to compose a similar example, and that was when the hangar filled with an emotional, heartfelt "HELGA!". They both flinched and exchanged glances. Then a second, more directed and demanding call filled the air again: "Helga Voronov!"

*"I need to go—I need a break, my colleague clearly has—"*

*"Yeah, —sure, of course— go check it out..."*

Grip dashed to the lab, his phone flashing in his hand.

Thalia stood by the table, cowering before Maria overhanging her:

"You thought I wouldn't notice? How did that even happen? Come in, Grip," she greeted him in a voice that didn't promise anything pleasant.

"What happened?"

"Yeah, what happened?" Derevyashko echoed from behind.

"The cage is choke full of scales!"

"Of what?" Grip asked.

"Loose... skin of local lizards. Maybe you can tell us about it?"

"Is it... does sand normally have it?"

"Yes," Maria lowered her tone. "But not in such quantities."

"... Mary—" Thalia began softly.

"Don't you 'Mary' me now, not this time. How did it— you. You said you let the lizard out. Have you put Newt inside?"

"I don't see the problem. Sand has more skin than usual, so what?" Grip shrugged. "Have you found the poison thing in it?"

"Not yet. Hasn't finished scanning yet. But if I'm gonna discover something else there, better tell me right away."

Thalia was looking at Grip, defeated.

"It's not funny, Grip," Dmytro Ivanovich broke the silence. "You two are obviously hiding something."

"Do I understand it right? That the main goal of our mission is to continue our contacts with the lizards?" Grip spoke slowly.

"Precisely."

"Then everything must stay the way it is now."

Maria slumped a little.

"You've brought it here," she spilled her overflowing disappointment.

Thalia let out a quiet sigh.

"The success of our mission depends on how quiet this room will be," Grip insisted.

He turned back to look at Derevyashko and caught a glimpse of Stalina guarding the exit on the outside.

"If it told you not to tell us... how did it know..." Maria muttered under her breath.

“Why did you do this?” Derevyashko acted curious and oblivious to the tension.

“It’s not like we have any secrets,” Thalia commented. Everybody ignored her.

“It was a test... for us...” Grip replied.

“A test for what?” he frowned, curious.

“For idiocy. We’ve passed.”

Dmytro Ivanovich chortled.

“We’re sure it’s like us. Young. Careless. If we also weren’t like this, it wouldn’t talk to us.”

Maria nodded along to what was, probably, her own thoughts.

“We couldn’t ask for your approval and risk it all,” Grip continued.

“So, it has dared you?” Derevyashko summed it up.

“It was a planned operation,” Grip feigned confidence.

Derevyashko sent a brief glance towards Stalina lurking out of sight.

“So it was here that night,” Maria massaged her temples, stomachaching the realization. “Have you let him out? Even for a brief moment?”

Grip and Thalia shook their heads in unison:

“No.”

“How would you know if you—” Maria pressed Grip.

“—I know myself. I would never do it.”

“To protect Newt?”

“Yes, also that. He thinks he’s strong, but what if Irakli Kosmovich steps on him?”

"How did he even agree to come on board," Derevyashko wondered. "If they're so afraid of mechanisms?"

"It was his idea," Thalia objected.

"And you brought him in—"

"I'm sorry," Thalia addressed Grip. "We've messed it up. I was tired, I... didn't think it through... that Maria would bust us."

"Doesn't matter now," Grip nodded briefly. "I believe it's more important to find out where did the poison come from. And if now I'll have to write a long report explaining why we did it, I can. I've been thinking about this a lot."

"Oh, please oblige," Derevyashko nodded. "I'm not writing that one for you."

Maria sat down and leaned back. The silence dragged on.

"Formally speaking..." Derevyashko spoke up. "Has it helped or hindered the mission?"

"Helped."

"Certainly?"

"Without a doubt."

"Even if you tell him that we know now?"

"That's why I asked you to be quiet!"

"You know we know."

"But I haven't told you," Grip insisted.

"Now that's something for you to sort out, you're the diplomat."

Grip shrugged, irritated.

"OK. Go back to your studies—"

"—I'd rather—"

"—then write me that report you've just promised."

“Yeah, OK. I guess. I’m too emotional anyway.”

Derevyashko and Stalina went the other way. Grip could make out a bit of Dmytro Ivanovich addressing her:

*“And the strangest part is that the strat—”*

*“What was that? You rascals got into some mischief?...”* Irakli Kosmovich asked, fumbling for the phone again.

*“A little...”*

*“Oh. Well, it’s always been mighty hectic here, and you kids made it into one lovely circus.”*

*“... I’m afraid Thalia will get in trouble for this mischief. When it was mostly mine to begin with.”*

*“Should I know more?”*

*“Nah, nah, no details. Just my distress talking.”*

*“Must be tough, with your superior on-site... OK, not my circus, not my lizards. Let’s get maths out of your way.”*

Somehow Grip ended up listening about phonetic patterns of word loaning. None of that seemed applicable to humans and lizards, but Grip found it interesting nonetheless, because he found algebra predetermined and boring in comparison. Yet all good things come to an end.

*“Enough for today, guess you have that mischief of yours to deal with.”*

*“True.”*

*“What are we gonna do next time? I also have to prepare.”*

*“Drawing?”*

*“What, drawing? I... huh. Do I even have to prepare for that, or*

*will you just sit here and draw?*  
*"Forget it then, how about physics?"*  
*"Sure, why not? Physics it is. Deal."*

Grip left to his new room to agonize over what naturally gravitated towards an incident report:

*I, Grip Avdotievich Stavropolskiy, have smuggled a representative of an alien civilization onboard. The ambassador has expressed his desire to visit our crew quarters. The envoy has made himself clear that we were not allowed to notify any of the other crew members of this excursion. Said desire has been expressed unequivocally, unambiguously and uncompromisingly, leaving no possibility to continue the diplomatic relationship outside of satisfying the request.*

*Due to this, I've started to plan out the details of excursion and discuss it with my colleague Helga Voronov, as she was a more experienced agent, and I wanted to ensure the maximum possible safety for all the parties involved. We've designed a chamber ensuring the safety of the ambassador by ruling out physical contact with anything but the contents of it over the course of the entire presence onboard. We've picked a fitting animal to swap with the envoy. The ambassador's presence onboard has lasted for one day... The chamber has been placed in my room and hasn't left it until the next evening, when my colleague and my immediate superior have transported it back to the dome, an activity I could not partake in due to a recent incident in the living*

*quarters leading to my demise.*

*So from here on, the described events will be told from the words of my colleague who performed the reverse swapping. The swapping was successful and incident-free, the ambassador was satisfied with the whole ordeal, thus ensuring and bolstering our communication going forward. Moreover, our biologist Maria Stinner has acquired some biological material from the ambassador that she can study now.*

Grip re-read the result, backtracked to the “reverse swapping” bit, left a gap with a note:

*what Thalia told me: Newt got out, helped catch lizard, drank*

And slotted in the following:

*I've joined them after the swapping has already been completed. After ensuring that the ambassador is content with the trip, I've helped transport the chamber back to the base together with its original inhabitant, and handed it over to our biologist Maria, where scanning has revealed the fact of the infiltration I'm describing in this report.*

*I believe this report should be classified, as the ambassador has requested the infiltration to remain secret, and every new person reading this increases the risk of sabotaging our diplomatic effort as a whole.*

He then began editing the next paragraph to make it blend, transplanted the classification notice to the bottom, moved the note

further up, and that's when he got another "come to the lab" from Maria, perfectly echoing her previous "come to the lab" and the "come to the lab, I'll explain it" before that one. No shouting this time though.

For the third time today they convened in the tiny lab. Maria demonstrated Thalia a familiar dotted pattern, but with two vertical green lines overlaid on top of it.

"... and back. Look."

"What am I looking at?" Grip asked.

Maria zoomed out and tilted the camera to reveal the entire cage.

"Trace of what?" Derevyashko inquired from behind in a cheerful, curious voice. "DNA?"

"A bit of organics; nope."

"That's the outer side?"

"Here's the inside."

She sent the viewpoint spinning around the cage's shorter wall until it crossed into the cage, and the other side looked very much the same: a gradient-meshed wall bore two almost straight vertical green lines.

"Which one is that? Of the two sides," Thalia spoke up in a tense quiet voice.

"The last one to scan, but it's symmetric. Maybe you can remember."

"Is it all the way through the wall? This trace," Grip pointed at it.

"No-no-no," she sent the camera spinning again. "These are surface traces. I can even tell you which one is which, mm... This one's crawling in and this one's for crawling out."



“Crawling in?”

“And out.”

“It was him,” Thalia exhaled bitterly. “It was him after all.”

Grip groaned quietly.

“Congratulations, professor Miyamoto,” Derevyashko announced without a trace of encouragement in his voice. “Case closed.”

“Why are you staring at me like that,” Grip addressed Thalia. “I’m reprinted, remember?”

“Indeed you are,” she nodded with caution.

“You’re the dangerous one! Out of the two of us—”

“—That’s some exemplary diplomacy you’re carrying out,” Maria interrupted him. “Day three— no, day four, —and one of them kills one of us.”

“He didn’t want to! Because that’s super stupid!” Grip insisted.

“You abducted one of them, remember?” Derevyashko looked up from his phone.

“We—”

“Wasn’t me though,” Maria countered. “That was before the contact.”

“You are writing that report, aren’t you?” he asked Grip.

“I am,” Grip nodded.

“Send it to me as is right now. And start writing a new one.”

“He can’t. It’s almost dawn,” Thalia stated matter-of-factly.

Grip obliged, hit “Send”, heard Dmytro Ivanovich’s phone tick.

“We need to go,” she insisted.

“New ground rule, kids. Nobody’s killing anyone. OK?” Maria was bitter. “... And by the way, I’ve found nothing dangerous in

that cage.”

“I didn’t plan to kill anyone,” Grip stated.

“Then try not to die,” Stalina replied from the hallway.

“Sure,” Grip nodded.

“Listen,” Thalia addressed Maria. “When he fell onto me, do you think he was trying to—?”

“No. I’m sure he wasn’t,” Grip replied.

“Why?”

“If that’s how it’s done, if it’s, ugh, crawling in and out, that’s not quick. It can’t just attack you from a distance, it’s a... slow process, I guess. Leave the body. Settle in, maybe—”

“—it could infect me and keep running around. And I won’t—”

“—two tracks, see?” Maria pointed at the screen again. “He came back—”

“—I don’t think it infected you, yeah,” Grip continued. “It could try its anae—... freeze you, for example, or what does it do—”

“—nothing,” Maria interjected. “it does nothing—”

“—to humans, yes, but, I mean, lizards. He wasn’t trying to kill you.”

“How do I protect from it, what do I do?” Thalia pressed Maria.

“Cover your nostrils, ears and mouth?” she suggested.

“That sure won’t be suspicious. Especially mouth,” Grip laughed nervously.

“Keep in mind that it might kick in only an hour later. Shower thoroughly. Oh, yeah, it’s also not unique to Grip.”

“Is there a vaccine?”

Who knew Thalia’s face could get even more pale?

“Not a great one.”

“Tested on?...”

“Just Grip.”

“So you’re already...” she turned to him.

“No, I... Several hours ago I still had a choice. To wait or to vaccinate.”

“And what’s your choice now?” Maria asked in a tired voice.

“... Honestly, I don’t think it’ll happen again. I’d wait. I’m more afraid I’ll bring this on board—”

“—It’s not an infection, remember?”

“Yes, and? Doesn’t make it better.”

“We won’t go mad and die all at once.”

“Still, I’d rather not. I like all of you.”

“So, how many do you—” Thalia began again.

“One. Grip’s one.”

“I want it then.”

“Take it, you’re a more useful specialist,” Grip gladly yielded.

Maria opened the fridge, and gestured to Thalia to come along.

“When will it—”

“—four hours, give or take.”

“It’s already sunset!”

“I’ll print more, just in case. Come here...”

“For the record, again, it’s not deadly to them, is it?” Derevyashko inquired.

“It’s not,” Maria replied without turning away from Thalia.

“That more or less rules out intent to murder.”

“I have an idea,” Grip jumped. “He didn’t try to kill me, just to get

in. They tried with adults, it didn't work, so they asked for kids." Derevyashko looked at Maria slightly shaking her head.

"I don't think so."

"Is it possible that the way... into the head... no longer works? For adults."

"Huh?" Maria disposed of the tiny syringe.

"Does something change in your head when you grow up?"

"No, why are you asking? Wait, was he interested in small animals specifically?"

"Yes, he was," Thalia confirmed grimly.

"Yes."

"They wore suits for what, half a year?" Stalina asked from the hallway.

Maria nodded.

Grip pointed at the jar:

"We didn't let him touch the fish, and it was glass and water... Just in case, can you scan its brain?"

"I could, when I get time for this. I'll need to freeze—"

"—They haven't touched," Thalia insisted.

"Doesn't matter! What if it hid in the cage first and then got into it?"

"Excellent thinking, pro—" Dmytro Ivanovich shut up under Grip's piercing gaze.

"Understood. Yeah," Maria grabbed the jar and headed out.

"Actually, let me try this first..." she finished as she walked towards the teleports.

"*Oh well*," Thalia murmured, staring at the floor while rubbing

her neck.

*"While we're packing... we need to agree on what to tell him, cause I guess—"* Grip began as she glanced at him and headed out.

He followed her to the hallway.

*"I've skipped a day and a half, has he asked for anything?"*

*"No, he was... excited after an adventure. Happy, scared, maybe. He just wanted to go home."*

Thalia now looked friendly, focused and thoughtful.

*"Agree on what exactly? Hiding that the adults know?"* she continued.

*"First of all, this. And in general. We should act as if we don't know any more than we knew yesterday."*

*"And you didn't die, you just felt bad and then—ugh, I don't know to write that anyway—and you just rested before joining us."*

They entered her room, adorned with white figurines and a larger aquarium. Grip checked it out briefly.

*"Not like I know these words either,"* she continued. *"I don't even know how to write "die". But, you know what! I guess "proper" does mean "ruling" after all. To control. Mind control, specifically."*

She hopped on the bed, squirmed there, and instinctively rubbed her neck once again.

*"What'chu got there?"* Grip stepped closer.

*"What?"* she froze. *"Ah,"* she averted her eyes. *"Nothing. I put him there myself, remem— Uh. Right behind my ears."*

*"Maybe you just haven't scratched it right yet."*

*"Oh, shut up."*

*"Just kidding. Look, calm down. You've been OK for a long while since. And now you're also vaccinated."*

She nodded and eased up a little.

*"What are these things, by the way?"* Grip changed the subject.

*"Decorations. I... just like them."*

*"Do they hold any... meaning?"*

*"No. But I think they look like animals. This one's like a bird..."*

At least from where he stood, it looked like anything but a bird.

*"I've asked Stalina, and she said we're allotted up to 10 g of decorations per day. And I've scaled up the lightest ones."*

*"Nice. And all I have is a pet."*

*"You also can order some."*

*"Speaking of which, got any paper?"*

Grip ran around the base to grab blank paper, then the sheets he left at the canteen, then to his old room for the pencil... Thalia awaited him at the airlock. The sun was almost down, but he could now walk this patch of the desert even on a starless night, with his eyes closed.

"Uh oh," Thalia let out as the inner door slid open, as she slowly lowered her reflector to the ground, eyes locked at the centre. Two lizards waited for them there, one twice the size of the other one.

"Interesting..." Grip intoned.

They approached the centre with great care. Thalia assumed position across Newt, Grip put the paper down and sat to the left, facing the larger lizard. The first phase was already on the

sand in front of them:

“[exist-?] [sky-in] [be-new’]”

“[true-not]” Grip wrote after a brief hesitation.

“[we] [see] | [exist] [sounds’]” the large lizard wrote in silence, without rattling.

“[sound-?]”

Newt wrote nothing and stayed behind. It was unlikely he could even see the

“[exist] [sounds’]”

over the large lizard’s body.

“[exist-not] [sky-in] [be-new’]” Thalia assured towards the large lizard.

“[exist] [down-in] [living place’]

| [living place] [go] [up’]”

“[true]” Grip wrote, then elaborated:

“[exist] [up-in] [be-new-not’]

| [be-new-not] [go] [down’]”

“[yours-of-?]”

“[true]” Grip pointed at the sign again.

“[I] [show]” Newt clicked, making the large lizard turn its eyes towards him.

Or at least Grip thought it was a “[show]”.

“[you] [show] [aforementioned’]

| [be-new] [show] [aforementioned’]” it stated.

“[exist] [up-in] [be-new-not’] [exist] [down-in] [be-new’]

| [be-new-not] [go] [down’] [exist] [down-in] [be-new-not’]” Grip continued, and then decided to clarify: “[be-new] | [be-I-?]”

The lizard glanced at Newt again.

“[exist] [here-in] [be-new’]” Grip erased it all and attempted another tactic.

“[exist] [up-in] [be-old’] [be-old] [go] [down’]  
|[exist] [down-in] [living place’] [living place] [go] [up’]”

the lizard stated, without asking anything again.

“It’s so that there—” Thalia began, but stopped, bombarded with a barrage of angry rattling.

Everybody looked at her, until she continued, nervously:

“[exist] [up-in] [living place’] [be-first] [living place] [go] [down’]”

“[exist] [down-in] [living place’] [be-second] [living place] [go] [up’]”

The large lizard has inspected her writing, stopped to think, then turned to offensive again:

“[exist] [living place-in] [yours-of] [be-new’]”

“[true]” Grip agreed.

“[purpose-?]” it wrote with a swift swipe, the whisper of the parting sand echoing the absent rattling.

“[be-new] [see]

|[living place-in] [sleep-of]

|[exist-not] [danger’]” Grip reassured it.

The lizard turned to Newt, rattled something:

“[you] [...-?] [...]”

Then went to write:

“[be-new] [be-danger-?] | [you-?] [sleep]”

“[be-new] [be-danger-not] | [I] [sleep]”

“[you] [...-?] [...]” it turned its head at Newt.



Grip squinted, as if it helped him understand.

“[exist] [inside-in] [I] [...] [...] [...] [exist] [outside-in] [I]” was all he could make out of Newt’s response.

The large lizard froze with its head turned.

Then, if rejoicing was laughter after all, that’s how the ensuing exchange played out:

“Hehe,” the large lizard loudly chuckled.

“Hehe,” Newt backed it with a nervous chuckle of his own.

“Hehe,” the large one repeated before charging at Newt. “[I]! [...]! [you-...]! [...]! [...]!”

Instead of running away, Newt dashed towards Thalia. As the large and less manoeuvrable lizard ran along the glass line clicking at him, he took the shortest path to the glass half and there he started climbing up Thalia’s suit in a spiral while rattling something back. She, in turn, resisted the urge to shake him off, gave Grip a short “WHAT” glance, twisted to keep an eye on Newt, and started to carefully get up. Grip sprang to his feet and, lost for words, clapped instead. All rattling stopped for a second as he got everyone’s attention.

Grip stretched his hand out towards Newt, he rattled something in return.

“[you] [be-...] ...” echoed the response from below.

Grip pointed at his palm with a finger, Newt rattled again, but started climbing towards it. Thalia twisted to take a better look at Newt, slightly hindering his efforts, and asked Newt in a voice full of doubt:

“Go?”

“Stop,” Grip nipped the idea in the bud. “Everybody calm down.”

“[...-not]” the large lizard objected to something.

Newt reluctantly crawled onto Grip’s hand, letting Thalia untwist herself and act unencumbered. Grip brought Newt closer to his ear to tune into his quieter ratting until he could make out the repeated “[do-go]”.

“No,” Grip told him in his best language teaching tone, and Newt lowered his head in silence.

Grip looked down; the context strongly implied it was “[be-new] [do-go] [down]” being shouted at them.

“Explain.”

“Explain what?” Thalia echoed, disoriented.

“Please just write ‘explain’, OK?”

Thalia sat down again to write “[do-explain]”, as ratting got quieter and calmer over time.

“[be-new] [be-proper-not] [do-go] [down]”

“[I] [eat] [tail] [be-new-of]” came the explanation.

“Hehe. Why not proper?”

“[do-explain] [be-new] [be-proper-not]” Thalia continued.

The large lizard stopped to think for a good half a minute.

“[I] [see-not] [...] [...]” Newt rattled.

Grip gave the long-set sun a prolonged glance.

“[you] [show] [be-proper] [be-new]”

“[you] [do-hold] [be-new] [down]” it finally replied.

Grip started to lower himself back, while Newt rattled in panic: “[do-hold] [up’] [do-hold] [up’]” his clicking finally switched to simple concepts.

Grip unceremoniously grabbed him around the body and lowered onto the sand. Newt wiggled, rattled “[do-hold] [up’]”, tried to twist its way back into safety, then went for a running start. Grip held him above the ground, watching the sand fly up, while the large lizard calmly aimed for the Newt tail’s... base.

“Uh-huh,” Grip noted, and yanked Newt upwards at the last moment, much to the large lizard’s angry, clicking dismay.

“I’ll take him, you’ll write,” Thalia suggested without a trace of enthusiasm. Grip shook his head.

Newt stopped panicking and dangled obediently like an exhausted sausage.

“Is Newt proper? Will you bite his tail?” Grip dictated.

“[be-new] [be-proper-?]”

[you] [eat-?] [tail’] [be-new-of]” Thalia gave up on alignment.

The large lizard stopped rattling and replied with signs Grip never saw before, so he could only assume what their meaning was:

“[eat] [be-new’] [be-proper-not]

[be-new] [break] [properness’]”

“Write down the last two.”

She swiped the sand off the glass before writing the signs down. The large lizard watched her, disoriented.

“Done.”

“Why did he break it?”

“[do-explain] [be-new] [break] [properness’]”

“*Antestroke upon ‘new’*,” Grip corrected her.

“*Antewhat?*”

“*Forget it.*”

“[be-new] [want-not] | [yous] [know]”

“Doesn’t want what? Know what?”

The large lizard inferred his confusion without any translation, and extended the writing:

“[be-new] [want-not] [break’] [properness’]

| [yous] [know] [yours] [know]”

Grip brought Newt up to the eye level. He wiggled approvingly, welcoming the upwards movement. Grip placed him on his right shoulder. Newt clung to it tight, its head bumping against Grip’s chin.

Grip lowered to his knees, displacing Thalia from the centre.

“[I] [want] [show’]” he wrote carefully. “[do-eat-not] [tail’]  
[be-new-of]”

“[be-new] [show-not] [be-new] [be-proper-not]

| [do-hold] [do-go] [be-new’] [down’]”

“[I] [want] [know’] [explain’]

| [do-explain] [be-new’] [break] [properness’]”

“[be-new] [be-wise-not]

| [be-new] [want-not]”

Grip just stared at the writing disapprovingly. Thalia moved closer to Grip, almost forming a shoulder-to-shoulder escape route for Newt.

“[be-new] [show-not] [we’]

| [we] [go] [down’]” the lizard ran out of patience.

“Good,” Thalia suddenly said in her language teacher voice.

“[true-not]” Newt rattled into Grip’s neck.

“We have a problem, Grip,” she spoke softly. “We need to take a side.”

Her voice had a soothing effect on Newt and irritated the other lizard.

“I need better answers than that,” Grip spat out angrily.

“[you] [think] | [we’] [be-danger-?]” he continued the questioning.

“[yours] [be-danger] | [yous] [be-danger-not]” was the reply.

“[be-new] [be-danger-?] [ours-of]”

“[be-new] [be-wise] [be-danger-not]

| [be-new] [be-wise-not] [be-danger]”

“[true]” Grip agreed wholeheartedly.

“[exist-not] [be-new’]

| [exist] [be-new’]” Grip wrote and topped the columns off with

“[do-explain]”.

“[exist] [be-new’] [animals-of]

| [exist-not] [be-new’] [ours-of]

Thalia stared daggers at Grip.

“[be-new-?] [show]” Grip wrote and added an isosceles right triangle as the third sign.

The lizard took its sweet time to answer:

“[aforementioned] [be-new-not]

| [aforementioned] [be-I-not]”

“[yours] [show-not] | [yours] [show]” Grip inquired. “[do-explain]”  
“[ours] [see-not] [yours’] | [ours] [see] [yours’]” the lizard parried.  
“[yours] [want-?] [know’] [ours’]...” Grip started writing and got promptly poked between the ribs. “Ow!”

“Are you trying to end the contact?” Thalia hissed furiously.

“It’s just a question—”

“—You can’t ask such loaded questions!—”

“—If it’s only Newt who wants to talk to us, we’re already done!”

Grip hissed in return simultaneously. “If Newt only speaks for itself, that’s already it!”

The large lizard, meanwhile, answered them:

“[we] [know-not] [purpose’] [yours-of]

| [exist] [interest’] [exist-not] [purpose’]”

“[we] [show] [yous] [show] [exist] [purpose’]

| [we] [show-not] [yous] [show-not] [exist-not] [purpose’]” Grip steered back.

“[I] [understand-not] [purpose’] [yours-of]

| [be-new] [want] [purpose’] [yours-of]” it stated.

Grip glanced at his shoulder, reached out to the beginning of the phrase and circled “[be-new] [want] [purpose’]”. Newt didn’t like the stretching manoeuvre, and started turning clumsily.

“[exist] [?#5?] [ours-of] | [exist] [be-many-not] [ours’]”

Newt’s crawling was rewarded with grabbing him by the sides and placing him back on the shoulder, facing outwards.

“[do-explain] | [?#5?]” | [?#5?] [be-animal-of-?]”

“[be-new] [want] | [you’] [help]”

“[I] [understand-not] [?#5?']”

“[?#5?] [be-first] | [?#5?] [be-second]” the lizard wrote sideways, as if it addressed someone invisible, and then returned to repeat to Grip:

“[exist] [be-many-not] [ours']”

“[exist] [be-many-not] [animals'-?]

| [aforementioned-?] [be-?#5?] [yours-of]”

“[exist] [be-many] [animals']

| [exist] [be-many-not] [ours']”

“May I?” Thalia reached towards the sand.

Grip nodded.

“[exist] [ours-in] [object'] [be-complex]

| [aforementioned] [help] [exist'] [be-many-er]” she composed an unorthodox comparative.

“[I] [know] [aforementioned'] [exist'] [be-less-er']

| [be-new] [think] [aforementioned'] [exist'] [be-many-er']” the lizard borrowed part of it and instantly ruined her triumph:

“[ours] [want-not] | [yours'] [show]”

Thalia tensed up.

“[be-new] [want] [we'] [show]” Grip objected.

“[be-new] | [be-wise-not]” it countered.

“[object] [be-complex] [help] [exist'] [be-many-er'] - [true]

| [object] [be-complex] [help] [exist'] [be-less-er'] - [true]

| [object] [be-many] [help] [exist'] [be-less-er'] - [true]”

“[aforementioned-?] [help] [go']

| [you] [show] [aforementioned'-?]

“Yes, a teleport,” Thalia hissed.

“[true]” Grip wrote.

“They’re afraid of erasing...” Thalia voiced one rather obvious thought.

Newt began to shiver. Have its legs got tired?

“[do-exist-not] [be-less-er’]

| [do-exist-not] [be-less-er’]” the lizard stressed.

“[we] [help] [exist’] [be-many-er] [yours’]” Grip assured and continued:

“[be-new] [want] [show’] | [you] [eat-?] [be-new’]”

The lizard did not reply. Grip tried grabbing Newt again, eliciting an unmistakable “[true-not]”.

“[be-new] [go-?] | [living place’] [ours-of]” Grip asked.

“[be-new] [break] [properness’]

| [be-new] [can] [go’]” it replied and instantly followed with:

“[exist] [be-new’] [ours] [show]

| [exist-not] [be-new’] [ours] [show-not]”

“[ours] [can] [exist’] [be-many-er] [be-new’]

| [yours] [can] [exist’] [be-less-er] [ours’]” Grip composed.

“Wait,” he addressed Newt, who tried to crawl across again.

“[ours] [be-strong-not]

| [ours] [can-not]” the lizard objected.

“[yours] [can]” Grip circled, then proceeded:

“[exist] [animal-in] [be-old] [you’]

| [exist] [outside-in] [animal-of] [you’]

| [exist] [animal-in] [you-of] [you’]”

“[true]” the lizard agreed reluctantly and added “[yours]



[know-not] | [yours] [know]”

“Uh-huh,” Grip agreed.

Circled “[outside-in] [animal-of]”. Rubbed his eyes, tired of the darkness. Elaborated further:

“[substance] [yours-of] [be-danger]”

“[I] [understand-not] | [I] [be-substance-not]” the lizard objected.

“[yours] [be-danger]” Grip pressed forward. “[I] [know]”

“[do-explain]”

“[we] [go] [hold] [be-new] | [we] [go]—”

“He asked us not to tell adults,” Thalia protested.

“It said Newt broke the properness. They’ll kill him, he’s no longer part—”

“—Hear me out! Yes, it said he doesn’t speak for them. Yes, it promised to eat his tail. But they care, they—they won’t kill him,” she argued.

“Why do they let me take him? If they care—”

“—Look, I hear you! I’m not convinced.”

“[we] [go] [hold] [be-new] | [we] [go] [living place] [ours-of]” Grip continued. “[brain] [ours-of] [be-complex] | [you] [be-danger] [inside-in]”

“[can-not] [exist’-?] [inside-in] [ours’]” the lizard wondered.

“[yours] [go] [inside] | [can-not] [exist] [I]”

The lizard started to run in circles, stopped to breathe, continued...

“[exist] | [you]” it objected.

“[I] [be-new] [be-animal]” Grip explained to the best of his ability.

ties.

“[be-new] [go] [inside’]

| [exist] [be-less-er] [yours’]” it double-checked.

“[exist] [be-less-er] [ours’]

| [object]—” Grip didn’t get the chance to finish the column.

The large lizard charged him, rattling loudly, and started climbing the glass, then the right knee. Grip clapped again, almost sending Newt flying off his shoulder, and pointed at the sand with the index finger of his left hand. His attacker slowly backed off to the sand half.

*“You dare climb me once more, and I’m the one taking a bite out of you, got it? It’s—”* Grip almost got knocked off-balance by Thalia’s heavy stare.

“[you] [be-danger-?] [I-of]” Grip asked menacingly.

“[true-not]” the lizard admitted.

“[be-new-of]” Grip replaced the last sign.

The lizard made a circle and came back:

“[I] [understand-not] [I] [understand]

| [you] [want] [eat’] [be-new’]”

*“Come on!”* Grip uttered and went into explanations:

“[be-new] [want-not] [break’] [properness’]

| [be-new] [want] [know’] [I’]”

“[animal] [you-of]—

| [be-new] [break]—”

“[I] [go-not] [outside’]

| [I] [be-one] [be-animal]” Grip interrupted.

The lizard laid down to rest where it stood.

*"I can't take this any more, I need light,"* Thalia stood up and went for the reflector. *"And for the love of Maria: do not kill each other."*

Newt felt that something's happening and turned on the shoulders until he faced downwards.

*"You can climb down if that suits you better,"* Grip mumbled.

Thalia returned and set up illumination. The large lizard stood up, walked back and forth and lay back down.

"[I] [can] [exist'] [be-many-er] [yous']" Grip wrote as he ran out of patience.

"[I] [want-not] | [be-new] [want]" it replied.

"Huh," Grip shifted closer, reinvigorated:

"[I] [do-go-?] [do-hold-?] [be-new] [be-new-?]"

"[I] [do-go-?] [do-hold-?] [be-new] [two]"

"[true]"

"See?" he addressed Thalia triumphantly.

"Grip! You can't just take him—"

"—What? We just did that, remember—"

"—We can't just bring him—"

"—He's dead to them!... Don't you see? Where else will he go, they'll eat him!"

"No, they won't!"

"Why?"

"I... I don't believe it!"

"... wow," Grip threw up his left arm, remembering that Newt occupies the right shoulder at the very last moment.

“Newt has not agreed to that,” Thalia countered.

“No,” Grip succumbed to manic laughter. “Newt hasn’t asked me anything either.”

“You’re gonna lose trust of both sides!” she hissed.

“Nah, they’ve just allowed it. It’s gonna be fine,” Grip turned to the sand to write, cackling.

“Or become the worst decision in your life.”

“Oh, right? And what’s your...” Grip paused for a second. “What’s your plan?”

Thalia didn’t answer.

“Thought so.”

“[you] [want-?] [know’] | [exist’] [be-many-er] [ours’]” Grip asked.

“[object] | [be-complex]” the lizard replied without much interest.

Grip began to draw: “[be-old]”, another “[be-old]”, two arrows and a “[be-new]”.

“[I] [understand] | [animals’] [be-new]”

Grip drew another diagram:

“[be-old] > [object] [be-complex] [know] > [be-old] [be-second]”

“[be-old-?] | [be-new-?]”

“[be-new] > [object] [be-complex] [know] > [be-new] [be-second]”

“[exist] | [two’-?]”

“[exist] | [be-many]”

Grip suddenly realized that the lizard ignores his finger, staring up his arm at Newt instead. But it didn’t come to a fight, and the conversation resumed.

“[aforementioned] [help] [go’]” the lizard was well-informed.

“[true]” Grip agreed.

“[aforementioned] [help] [go] [sky]” the lizard extended.

“[aforementioned] [help] [go] [sky] [be-second]” Thalia crammed in another sign.

“[exist-not] [you] [be-first]

[you] [be-second] [go]” the lizard demonstrated its firm grasp of the concept.

“At least ask for their permission,” Thalia said.

“[you] [want-?] [hold] [be-new] [two]” Grip asked.

“[hold] [be-new] [be-wise-not] [one]

[hold] [be-new] [be-wise-not] [two]” the lizard replied and continued after a dramatic pause: “[properness] [be-broken] | [...] [...]”, pointing with a tail at a blank space, inviting Grip to continue.

“[properness] [be-broken] | [yours] [be-many]” Grip wrote upside-down confidently.

“That’s not an answer,” Thalia complained.

“[I] [do-go-?] [do-hold-?] [be-new] [two]” Grip repeated the question.

“[you] [show] [you] [can]

[you] [want] [you] [can]”

“Is that an answer?”

“Yes,” she admitted reluctantly.

“[be-new] [go] [hold] [animal] [be-large]...” Grip suggested.

“[be-new] [want-not] [animal] [be-large]” the lizard objected.

“[be-new] [can-not-?]”

“[be-new] [want-not]”

“[be-large] [be-old-not]” Grip delineated.

“[be-new] [be-new-not]” the lizard brought them into a dead end.

“*What? Why? Where have you even seen large animals?*” Grip asked aloud, to no answer.

“[exist] [up-in] [sun’] [exist] [down-in] [sun’]

[exist-not] [here-in] [you’] [exist] [here-in-?] [you’]” Grip reused the ritual form.

“[true]” the lizard didn’t elaborate.

“[you] [hold] [sign’-?] [you-of]”

“[I] | [be-second]”

“[you] [be-second]

[be-new] [...]” Grip pointed at a blank space.

“[be-new] | [be-new]” the lizard completed, contradicting its previous cryptic statement.

Grip slowly erased the writing.

“[you] [want] [know’-?]”

[exist’] [be-many-?] [ours’]” the large lizard suggested.

“[true]”

“[two] | [nine]”

“How much is it? When it’s written like—” Thalia asked.

“[eleven-?]” Grip asked directly with an elaborate sign.

“[true]”

“[yous] | [be-eleven-?]”

“[true]” the Second waved away.

“There must be some mistake,” Thalia murmured.

“[be-new] [be-eleventh-?]”

“[ours] [be-new-not] | [ours] [be-old-not]”

“[do-explain]”

“[exist-not] [be-together] [ours’]

| [exist] [be-together] [ours’]”

“[object-?] [help] [exist’] [be-many-er] [yous’]”

“[exist] [aforementioned’]

| [exist-not] [aforementioned’]”

“*Oh, come on,*” Grip sighed.

“[exist] [up-in] [sun’] [exist] [down-in] [sun’]

| [exist-not] [you’] [here-in] [exist] [you’] [here-in-?]”

“[true]” the lizard answered, and, this time, elaborated:

“[I] [show] [be-new’] [be-proper-not] [exist’] [be-less-er] [you’]

| [I] [show] [you’] [want] [exist’] [be-new’] [be-many-er]”

“[I] [think] | [be-second’] [be-proper]” Grip tried to express gratitude.

“[be-proper] | [be-less-er]”, the Second replied before running away.

“*Come here, you critter. Hope you won’t kill me today.*”

Grip picked up shaking Newt from the shoulder. Newt couldn’t decide which part of Grip to look at.

“*Please go guard the button.*”

“*What?.. Me?*”

“*Yes. I don’t want him to run away.*”

“*Oh, that one...*”

Thalia dragged her feet to the airlock, into the darkness, bitter and disappointed, then plopped onto the sand in front of it. Only

then Grip has put Newt down to write:

“[you] [go] [living place] [ours-of]”

Newt ran a circle, his legs almost failing him, stumbled into Grip’s hand and only then noticed the writing.

“[I] [want-not] | [go] [down]” he replied.

“[exist] [I-in] [you]”

| [exist] [be-less-er] [ours]” Grip kept grilling him.

Newt ran to the side.

“[I] [want-not] [aforementioned] [I] [understand]

| [you] [want] [eat] [tail] [I-of]” he wrote,

slightly curving around Grip’s hand.

“[I] [want] [exist] [be-many-er] [you]” Grip sent him into another lap.

“[you] [see] [I] [be-one]

| [you] [see-not] [I] [inside-in]” Grip continued.

“[see-not] | [you]” Newt confirmed selectively.

“[you] [be-danger] [inside-in]”

“[I] [be-danger] [outside-in]”

Both stared at each other, confused.

“[exist] [inside-in] [animal] [yours-of] [you] [be-danger-not]

| [exist] [inside-in] [I] [you] [be-danger]” Grip clarified.

“[exist] [be-less-er] [you]

| [do-explain] [exist] [you]”

“[object] | [be-complex]”

Newt rejoiced:

“[I] | [know]”

“[you] [want-?] [exist] [be-many-er] [yours]” Grip inquired.



“[true] | [true]”

“[you] [go] [living place] [ours-of]” Grip put his hand down and Newt climbed it.

He stood up to wave his left hand at Thalia.

“What’s up?” she screamed from the distance.

“*We’re coming home to copy this scarecrow,*” Grip giggled.

Newt was mesmerized by the sound of speech, turning his head towards it.

“*Has he agreed to that?*”

“*Well, he’s excited we can make more of them. Let’s go, let’s go hand him over to our biologists.*”

“*Maybe we even can.*”

“*Why not?*”

Thalia paused to read the remnants of the writings before she picked up the light.

“*Anything else I need to know about?*”

“*I think it’s all clear.*”

“*Glad it’s clear for you,*” she remarked angrily.

“*What do you want to know?*” Grip briefly considered sticking Newt to his suit before following her.

“*What does it all mean to the human-lizard relationship,*” she replied.

“*That’s the problem—*” Grip started giggling again.

“*Stop it! You act like a total kid! Think like a diplomat for once,*” she scolded him.

“*Listen, diplomat!... I was promised a life-sized statue!... with*

*a lizard on my shoulder!..." he struggled to contain laughter. "While it should've been a brain slug all along! Not so cool now, is it? Not any more!"*

*"At least we'll see how it looks like,"* Thalia softened.

*"... on my gravestone!..."* Grip continued. *"A statue for my grave... OK, let's go. I hope he's sorry and everything."*

*"If he's not, straight to the jar he goes. Wait, we'll need a second cage... And a..."* Thalia started giggling as well.

*"What?"*

*"I'll tell you later,"* she suppressed her laughter. *"Who's gonna carry him?"*

*"I will. He already saw my brain—"*

*"Outside or inside?... The suit!... You dolt, of course I didn't mean to... I can show you how—"*

*"—Ah, outside, of course! If he jumps down, he's getting his tail chewed anyway."*

*"I still— you know, forget it. Give him to me."*

She held Newt until Grip got dressed, then placed him on his shoulder. Together they paraded in silence in front of a lizard openly watching them from a distance.

Past the airlock, Grip unzipped the hood and grabbed Newt with both his hands.

*"Right, bring us a beaker or something. And Maria."*

Thalia rushed down the hallway in full outdoor suit, slowing down as Stalina turned from around the corner and transfixed her gaze on Grip... no, Newt:

*"Not this... thing again,"* she muttered as she began slowly approaching them.

*"Respect the ambassador!"* Grip caught a fit of manic laughter again. *"Thalia, apartments!"*

Thalia walked away briskly, as Lisa appeared, panicked and immediately left; something Stalina ignored entirely while shortening the distance. Not even blinking.

*"Maria! Your time has come!"* Thalia announced loudly from afar.

*"Don't you dare—"* echoed back at her.

*"Dan, shut down the comms! Now!"* Lisa's scream drowned away the rest. *"Wait— when?"*

Stalina stopped uncomfortably close to them, her eyes on Newt hanging off Grip's hands peacefully.

*"What's that?"* Grip wondered.

*"Lisa's lagging behind the plot."*

*"No, what's 'comms'?"*

*"'Communications'. Except Derevyashko shut them down long ago."*

*"When?"*

*"When we found out you ambassadors are killing each other."*

Lisa entered the hallway again:

*"Can I take a look?"* she asked on approach, intimidated by Stalina's stance and fixation.

*"Sure,"* Grip didn't have a care in the world.

*"That's... not how I imagined it."*

*"It? Your first contact?"*

“Yeah...”

Maria and Thalia rushed towards them with a jar, prompting Lisa to move out of the way.

“We also need sand,” Grip greeted them.

“We’ll move it into a large cage later,” Maria dismissed him.

“The one he’s already escaped once?” Stalina remarked.

“What do you want from me?!” Maria snapped.

“Sand!” Grip replied.

“Nothing we can’t fix with a good old roll of duct tape,” Thalia grinned.

“Poor guy can’t talk! Can he get some sand, please?”

“Um, I can go out and bring some,” Thalia suggested.

Maria held the jar next to Newt:

“Say again, how large is his tailwriting?” she asked mockingly.

“Ugh, forget it,”

Grip handed Newt to Thalia again, and she started cramming him into the jar, letting Grip take off the suit at last...

“Totally unlike everything I’ve imagined,” Lisa mumbled under her breath.

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All abuzz, the crew poured into the canteen, led by Grip carrying the jar.

“We have a guest, team!” he announced triumphantly as they took their seats. “Let me introduce Newt, our friend from out there, a reckless teenage lizard brain slug pilot! He doesn’t

... speak English, well, maybe he knows some, but just a little. He has to stay with us until his small family calms down a little, as, currently, they have some... what's the word... disagreement..."

Grip finally noticed that the room isn't paying much attention to him. Not even to Newt, for that matter. Lisa asked Maria something and received a short bark of a reply back; Dmytro Ivanovich exchanged glances with Stalina Filantievna guarding the door, who nodded back...

"... Wait a second. Ahem. What's going on?"

"Don't you get it?" Derevyashko asked.

"Not a thing, and you know it," Thalia replied instead.

"What's going on?!" Grip raised his voice, interrupting all the commotion.

"You mean," Lisa didn't mince words much. "Aside from you bringing in an alien mind control weapon?"

"Newt! is not! a weapon!" Grip's voice sliced the silence with fervour. "... and he can't control us! I died, remember?"

"Suppress upfront, boom, done. If only every such—" Maria saw Grip's face drop and bit her tongue.

"Boom?... Done?!" he articulated word by word. "If only every what, Maria?..."

She kept her lips tight.

Crushed by the realization dawning upon him, Grip slumped onto the couch between Thalia and Derevyashko. Instead of leaning back, he bent forward, until he almost engulfed the jar with his body and zoned out for a good few seconds as the quiet chatter

resumed.

## **(Not) principled**

“Grip!”

The voices fizzled out one by one.

“... over my dead body,” his attention latched onto Thalia’s figure of speech. One curious figure—

“Grip!” Maria persisted. “I know you’re not gonna crush it, but I’d really appreciate if you didn’t test— thank you. Thank you very much.”

Much to her and Newt’s appreciation, Grip sat straight and stared at her, scrambling for words, then cleared his throat and demanded:

“Can we. just. discuss it. Like normal people?”

“Note how none of us are jumping you to pry it out of your— uh, white knuckled hands,” Lisa remarked, disgruntled.

“So you do realize now,” Stalina took initiative, “what horrible things could happen if Newt goes to their—”

“—US?!” Maria shrieked, blown away by her audacity. “Then

imagine what happens if Feds get mind control!" That... scenario... didn't make Grip feel any better.

"Or we can both take one scan each." Derevyashko suggested in an extra thick accent. "After all—"

"How about nobody gets him," Grip interrupted him. "Are you serious? They're sentient, we're sentient, how can you even think about it? That's... wrong twice."

"Why did you bring him in then?" Lisa wondered.

"—What's wrong with you?—" Thalia hissed under her breath.

"... to copy him," Grip replied, his heart sinking again.

Maria raised her arms in exasperation.

"... but can't you just copy him? Without scanning—"

"—exactly do you think this—"

"—or erase the scan after—"

"Would you trust her to delete it?!" Thalia's semi-hiss came off bewildered. Betrayed.

"No. I don't think so."

Grip finally let go of the jar and massaged his temples, looking Newt in the eyes. He stood with his front legs up the wall, examining Grip.

"Then we must never let them—"

"—but we need to—"

"—I know, but can't you see? We can't—"

"This is getting ridiculous," Maria leaned back.

"No, this is serious," Grip objected. "Mind control is serious. What if they take over—"

"—We're not worrying about them taking over humans," Dmytro



Ivanovich weighed in. "That would be ridiculous indeed."

"Aren't you afraid you'll print thousands of them, put them inside people's heads, and then it turns out they have telepathy? And now they're a superbrain with people—"

"Grip, we're an advanced space-faring civilization spread over hundreds of planets. And we control what travels between them. They'd be lucky to capture one. And that's if telepathy is real."

"Grip. Why do you want to copy him in the first place?" Maria changed the subject.

"Newt wants to, they're dying! And they can't make more of them."

"You wanna tell me they can't procreate?"

"I don't know what is—"

"What did he say? Tell me exactly what he said, without making anything up."

"In English or without making anything up?" Thalia's voice dripped of sarcasm.

"It wasn't him, it was the Second," Grip corrected.

"A second one?" the room went abuzz. "What second lizard?"

"The Second is the name," Thalia was quick to clarify.

"Of the other lizard," Grip added.

"Stop pulling my leg—" Maria began.

"—no, it's true!—" Thalia insisted.

"—and tell it from the start."

"There were two of them this time," Thalia began. "Newt and

another, big one.”

“A parent, huh?” Derevyashko asked, amused.

“They don’t have parents,” Grip took over. “They were created all together.”

“And whatever created them...?” Maria didn’t like what she heard.

“Gone,” Thalia answered.

“And when I asked what its sign is, it wrote ‘second’,” Grip continued. “So I asked how many of them are there, and it said ‘nine’ and ‘two’.” “I asked ‘eleven?’ and it said ‘yes’.”

“Are you sure that’s not just its siblings? Family? Tribe?”

“It said there were more before, but now it’s just eleven.”

“So, I’m supposed to believe this entire planet has eleven sentient lizards with three forms of ‘you’ between the eleven of them?”

“That doesn’t prove anything,” Irakli Kosmovich spoke for the first time. “Other than there are more than three.”

“Eleven or not, Newt wants us to make more of them,” Thalia steered the discussion.

“And the other one?” Maria wondered.

“... does not... object to it,” Thalia picked the words carefully.

“Because it doesn’t care now,” Grip was quick to clarify. “Because Newt is no longer part of them, because he killed me—”

“—the Second was furious!”

“Oh, he was furious when he learned that Newt left his body for a walk. But when he learned he killed me, he was so angry he tried to climb me!”

“He means, to get to Newt.”

"Yes, to chew off Newt's tail!"

"... Wow," Lisa voiced it for everyone.

"So, Grip thinks Newt is exiled now," Thalia summed it up. "I'm not so sure, but I can say they don't take killing lightly."

"There's just eleven of them..." Derevyashko didn't make it clear whether it was an argument for exile or against it.

That reminded Maria of something:

"We'd better fix their natural reproduction mechanism, rather than just copying them."

"It said the thing no longer exists," Thalia shook her head.

"So, all we have is Newt," Lisa reasoned. "And, either way, we scan him."

"Why is it always like this..." Grip grasped for words. "You find one new good thing, and also twenty-five... bad ways to use it."

"My dad says, this is how it is," Thalia wasn't thrilled about it either. "And I should just accept it."

On the opposite side of the room, Lisa asked Maria something, and they started arguing in quiet, worried voice.

"I don't want to, and I will not," Grip hugged the jar tighter.

"Look at you, saving the world from Newt," Thalia found it funny.

*"I'm not trying to save the world! We're finally not alone in the universe, we're supposedly the smarter, advanced ones, and I want them to cut all the us versus them silliness,"* Grip switched languages for expressiveness.

Newt interrupted his usual thing of silently tracking who's speaking to quietly express his displeasure about his jar shaking too

much as Grip gets carried away.

“—doesn’t survive, I’ll become the most famous zoologist anyway.” Maria’s nervous joke filled the pause.

“I’m sorry you’re the smartest and most advanced one in the room, but they just aren’t there yet,” Thalia didn’t mock Grip, she mocked the adults. “I also want them to get over it in peace.”

*“Peace? That’s why you became a spy, for peace?”* Grip misunderstood who was the primary target of her derisive remark.

*“Back then I could neither walk nor talk.”*

*“Can confirm,”* Derevyashko weighed in nostalgically from the other side of the couch.

*“Urgh, fine, fight each other for all you want, that’s not even the worst. They want to shove sentient into sentient, and they won’t ask anyone.”*

*“They sure won’t,”* Thalia echoed bitterly.

*“And I couldn’t care less whether it’d be yours or ours who won’t.”*

*“Oh, neither will.”*

*“And you’re ready to live like this? For the rest of your life? With a lingering thought that a sentient worm could crawl in, take the wheel and control you?”*

*“Pfft! With what?!”* she burst out into giggling, making the room go quiet. *“Also, I’m vaccinated— wait, no, it’s against— ... dying.”*

*“Pum-pum-pum,”* Grip vocalized. *“How’s your neck, no longer itchy?”*

*“Yeah, now when they know what they want, they’re gonna find a way. If we free Newt now, they’ll comb the desert and try them*

*one by one— OK, maybe not,” she said with a glimmer of hope. “That’s not exactly good-looking, diplomatically speaking.”*

*“You know what’s awesome?” Grip pointed towards the ceiling. “They still don’t know a thing.”*

*“Yeah,” Thalia agreed wholeheartedly. “In a way, I’m glad you died.”*

*“No comms and vaccinated,” Grip nodded. “All pros, no cons.”*

*“Kinda... Sorry.”*

*“Oh, it’s not you I’m angry at right now, it’s, like, our dumpster of a world,” he raised the voice to address the entire room. “Could you, please, bring the cage?”*

*“The cage?” Stalina echoed.*

*“Yes, the one where the ambassador could, you know, stretch his tail.”*

*“Like, here?”*

*“Yeah, yeah, what are you waiting for?”*

*She reluctantly obliged.*

*“What do you think?”*

*“Me?”*

*Dmytro Ivanovich raised his palm as if he was looking right through it.*

*“You should start planning your time off. How about in three days?”*

*“So that you all can copy him—”*

*“No, I said in three days. Three days later. Where would you want to go?”*

*“Home? But that’s, like, the least important thing now.”*

"I don't want to you to work yourself all the way to an actual mental breakdown. Especially if it occurs in the middle of important negotiations instead of a middle of the night."

"But look what's happening—"

"Precisely, there's always a more interesting thing coming, but one more week is the most I'm gonna give you."

"Look, how am I supposed to relax?" Grip hugged the jar tighter.

"I need at least one of them on board," Maria raised her voice.

"Somebody needs to make it sit straight, and the thing inside it. And I'll need the comms back. And all the help I can get."

The last bit was directed at Lisa, who nodded back at her reluctantly. Thalia rubbed her eyes.

*"Do you know what are they talking about?"* Grip quietly asked her.

*"She helps her think. That's not important right now,"* she whispered back.

Unexpectedly, this made Derevyashko nod understandingly, as if now everything made sense, which only confused Grip further.

*"Please, have some mercy at me,"* he begged Thalia.

*"They link their brains. With a wire. To think quicker."*

Grip's face was skewing harder with every bit of new information divulged.

*"Better tell me, what are we gonna tell Newt,"* Thalia didn't find brain linking interesting.

*"Like what, don't control people? Don't let them control people with you?"*

*"Grip, he basically lives inside a lizard. I don't think he can*

*relate—*

*“—not what I mean.”*

Stalina returned with the cage.

*“And what did you mean?”*

*“I’ve got a question to the moral facet of your personality. Isn’t it compelled to tell him he’s surrounded by people who only see him as a weapon?”*

*“Sometimes your way with words is too twisted for me to follow,”* Thalia complained. *“The professional facet of my personality tells me to shut up until we have a solid plan.”*

*“At least he understands the value of life.”*

*“That’s true.”*

*“Except they draw the line at sentient species, because they do munch on lizards like—”*

*“They only eat flies!”*

*“Has anybody seen these flies?”*

*“Ugh, back at what you said before. Keep in mind he’s... Newt. Not exactly an exemplary lizard citizen.”*

Dmytro Ivanovich started exchanging weird looks with Irakli Kosmovich. A round or two of them later, they nodded and stood up in sync. Grip tensed up, but they just passed each other and exchanged seats; Derevyashko immediately addressed Lisa in English, while Irakli Kosmovich took his time to reach the couch.

*“I can’t agree more, Grip,”* he finally grunted, sitting down.

*“With what?”*

*“With the ‘why is it always like this’ part in particular.”*

*“And what would you do?”*

*"Sure not the putting sentient into sentient part. That's... abhorrent. I hope we can't pull this off yet, and it'd be awful if Newt turned out to be a missing link or something. Never bought into the 'somebody has to invent the nuke' argument... I'm so proud of you, kids. If you need help hiding him, I'm in,"* he winked.

*"Haha, there's no—",* Thalia forgot she was mid-phrase and jumped to the edge of the couch. "Mary!"

"What?" the other side turned their heads.

"Can you copy him by tomorrow evening?"

"Are you kidding me?! I don't even know what I'm freezing!"

"Overnight?"

"You wanna get him killed?"

*"See, no need to play hide and seek."*

"No pressure whatsoever," Maria remarked to her clique's amusement.

*"But that also means we're not bringing his copy tomorrow,"* Thalia continued.

"Yeah—"

*"You can give him to me."*

Unexpected Stalina standing so close made Grip jolt in surprise.

*"You?! Why would I give him to you?!"*

*"... Because I'm the only one who can guarantee that nobody else gets him?"* she replied in an eerily calm voice.

*"I'm not. Giving him. To you."* Grip made a poor attempt at mimicking her intonation.

*"As you say,"* she turned and joined the other side.

"Wow," Irakli Kosmovich summarized disapprovingly.



*"I'm not giving him to her," Grip repeated, shaken. "I don't know what she expected."*

*"I know where Maria keeps her lizard freeze," Thalia said in a bland voice. "Should I? Snatch it to slow them down."*

*"Yeah. Rather yes than no."*

*"Can I talk to him?" Irakli Kosmovich gestured towards Newt.*

*"Yeah, why not."*

*"Formally speaking, I sure cannot. You're the only ones authorized to."*

Grip turned to Thalia.

*"You can sure watch us talk. As for writing something yourself, only when I'm watching. And you need to be at least Grip level of tactful."*

Grip giggled, tactlessly shaking the cage again:

*"We could use some help with a cloning agreement", he suggested.*

*"Cloning agreement?" Thalia squinted at him.*

*"Something to sign before he gets cloned."*

*"Have you signed any— wa-ait, we've got a save point tonight!"*

*"Really?"*

*"Yeah, so, let's scan you, so he sees it's not scary—"*

*"—Wait, why—"*

*"—be right back."*

She jumped off the couch and headed to the other group, then stood behind them.

*"I'd rather see you defuse the situation, not stir up more trouble,"*  
for the lack of the other troublemaker, Irakli Kosmovich

addressed Grip.

*"Then they should calm down with these ideas—"*

He kept staring at Thalia, so she abruptly glanced sideways, and disappeared faster than Grip scanned the room for Stalina and understood he was fooled.

*"You might've missed that in the heat of the moment, but Lisa has a point. Nobody's taking Newt from you by force—"*

*"—which is curious—"*

*"—and keeping it civil is in your best interest. Do you agree?"*

*"Yes. Why scan me again? I'm freshly minted—"*

*"Nah, she's right: one day you were alright, one day you were out, and one day was today,"* Irakli Kosmovich counted on his fingers.

Grip nodded:

*"At least I won't retake algebra."*

*"Heh. Just my luck. I study dead and endangered languages all my life, now we find aliens, and you come back claiming just eleven native speakers remain,"* Irakli Kosmovich complained.

*"But there's a silver lining to it. If there's just eleven, they must be ancient, if not immortal."*

*"I suppose."*

*"Like, centuries of living in a tightly woven collective. Maybe we can learn a useful thing from them for a change: how to live to two hundred without going bonkers?"*

*"Huh?"*

*"Something our powers that be would love to hear about. Do you know how old Svobodin is? He was already there when I was*

*born."*

*"That'd require us to take interest in something else than hurting each other for a minute," Grip replied bitterly.*

*"So, what do we do?" Derevyashko raised his voice.*

*"Wait, where's Thalia?" Stalina asked Grip.*

*"She doesn't report to me," he lowered his head and pulled out his phone.*

*"We need you both scanned today. Especially with this thing onboard."*

Grip sent Thalia three question marks. Stalina left the canteen, and, less than ten seconds later, Thalia returned, hopped back on the couch and checked the phone.

*"We need to explain freezing to him," Grip addressed her.*

She nodded back.

*"So, when they freeze me, make sure he understands we need to freeze him, not his lizard— No, I don't know how, that's the question. He needs to understand that he must hold still, and that he needs it to get..."*

Both got distracted by Irakli Kosmovich moving his finger along the glass for Newt to follow.

*"Don't worry, I'll come up with something," Thalia finally spoke.*

*"And I'll watch him while you'll be out."*

*"And I'll watch Stalina watch you," Irakli Kosmovich joked.*

*"... watch him watch me. Everybody, watch out," Grip declared.*

*"Breathe easy. They can't copy him yet. They're not ready. And by the way, where's Stalina?"*

*"Looking for you!"*

“Here you are”, Stalina entered the room.

“Finally!” Dmytro Ivanovich didn’t go into who’s looking for whom. “So, what do we do? Scan twice?”

“No,” Thalia insisted.

“Pack up and fly away,” Grip said, looking at his boss. “I like this idea more and more.”

“I’m OK with that,” he nodded.

“But I want to help them. You’re solving the wrong problem,” Grip addressed Maria. “Can you fix their pro– uh–”

“That also requires scanning him. And who knows what else,” she winced.

“*Stalina Filantievna...*”

“*Huh?*”

“... you must have a protocol for everything. What’s the protocol for a horrible secret? And don’t tell me everybody just kills everybody.”

“OK, I won’t. But first you leave a warning, then minimize the chances of rediscovery.”

“What? Can’t be... that there’s never been any... *mutual document destruction.*”

“I’ve been told there is no such thing. Look, how would that work? We tell them we’ve erased everything, they tell us they have, then what? How do we check, how do we enforce that?”

“Destroy...” Grip was on the verge of panic.

“Destroy what? They can hide and exfiltrate it any way they want. Like, any sufficiently large chunk of data they transmit, they could be hiding the scan there.”

"We're trapped," Thalia squeaked.

"—What do you—" Grip's voice faltered.

"Not yet," Derevyashko objected.

"Whatever you folks are up to," Irakli Kosmovich spoke slowly, "let me leave before you close the door."

"Nobody's closing anything," Maria spoke up. "They're just overreacting."

"You want to turn people into zombies, who will do what you—"

"—See!—"

Grip's knuckles went white again.

"—Don't be so dramatic," Dmytro Ivanovich interjected. "We're not cartoon villains trying to turn people into zombies. As if there weren't cheaper ways to make people do what—"

"Like declaring them enemies of the state?" Thalia lashed out on him.

"Like depriving everyone of basic rights to sell those back to them," Stalina smirked at her.

"How dare—"

"Oh cut the crap, both of you," Maria barked with disgust, scaring Lisa. "The last thing I need right now is your petty bickering."

"OK, I got it. We all need time to process it," Derevyashko nodded.

"But I don't want to wrap it up on such a low point. Quick, give me something positive to top off the day."

"We haven't—" Thalia squeaked.

"—Ice cream—" Grip suggested to Maria, leaving no head unturned.

"Sorry, What?" Stalina's look was full of worry.

“He said positive. I know you have—” Grip addressed Maria again.  
“Ow! *What are you doing!*” he shielded his ribs from Thalia to Newt’s upset rattling.  
“OK! As you wish!” Maria snapped and stormed off.

“What’s going on in here?” Derevyashko acted genuinely curious.  
“Maria printed ice cream, and we ate it,” Thalia admitted.  
“Well, it sure is hot in here,” he nodded, perplexed at the cost of this affair.  
“You asked for something positive,” Grip insisted sheepishly as the silence dragged on. “I don’t know what comes to your mind; for me, it’s ice cream.”  
At least Stalina stopped looking at him as if he was losing it.

The room went quiet to follow Maria’s hasty stride.

“Ice cream! Everybody gets ice cream!” she burst in with a nondescript container, attracting the audience’s attention like a magnet. “You, the saviour of the humankind!... You, the lizard freeze thief!... You, the dissociate father figure!...”

“Sorry,” Grip mouthed to Thalia, expecting another prod.

“... I only have two spoons though, so, please, come up with something.”

“I’ll get the glasses,” Stalina was already rummaging through the cupboards.

“Mix it with food, you gotta to mix it with food, otherwise it’s bland as ice,” Thalia hopped off the couch as everyone set into motion.

“And I’ll go get some sleep now,” Maria continued. “Before you—”

“Not so fast!” Thalia made her wince. “Save point!”

“... Then let’s go?”

“No, I’m watching Newt watch Grip get scanned first!”

“Come! on!”

“Stalina!” Irakli Kosmovich was eager to share the joke. “I have my eyes on you having your eyes on her—”

Maria stretched out on the now-vacant couch with a heartfelt groan.

---

Newt crawled out of the jar and onto the sand to demonstratively stretch out his tail.

*“I’m sorry, old pal,”* Grip mumbled at him compassionately.

Loudly stomping, Thalia returned with a small stack paper.

“Here!”

“Thank you!”

“Hey, leave me some.”

“[do-show] | [signs’]” Grip told Newt to write instead of rattling.

“[do-show] | [do-explain]”

“[I] [go] [object’] [be-complex]

| [you] [see] [I] [go]” Grip wrote and pressed the paper against the glass.

Newt inspected it from an uncomfortably close distance.

“[exist] [you’] [be-new-?]” Newt didn’t have much space to express himself.

“[object] [know] [I’]

| [I] [go] [outside’]”

Newt clicked again, and Grip yanked the paper back to elaborate:

“[you] [exist] [be-less-er] [I’]

| [object] [exist] [be-many-er] [I’]”

“[I] [exist-not] [be-less-er] [you’]” Newt was nervous.

“[you] [can] [exist’] [be-many-?] [outside-in]” Grip wrote and changed his mind:

“[can] [exist’] [outside-in] [animal-of] [you’]

| [be-many-?] [exist] [sun’] [exist-not] [sun’]”

“[exist] [up-in] [sun’] | [can-not] [exist’] [I’]” Newt answered tersely.

“*Should I tell him to come out? For scanning,*” Grip asked Thalia. She and Irakli Kosmovich were deep into drawing some scheme on a folded sheet.

“*Or is it more dangerous if he’s outside, and he’ll evaporate—*”

“*Ugh, stop it,*” Thalia cut him short. “*Not now. Leave it to Maria.*”

“[exist] [object-in] [be-complex] [I’] [can-not] [go’] [object-in] [be-complex]” Grip wrote to little reaction.

“*OK, check this out!*”

“[I] [go] [object’] [be-complex]

| [you] [see] [I’] [go]” Grip showed to Newt again, while reading Thalia’s chaotic diagram:

“[go] [object’] [be-complex] >

| [exist] [object-in] [be-complex] >

| [go-not] [object-in] [be-complex] >

| [object] [be-complex] [know] >

| [go-not] >

| [exist] [up-in] [sun’] >

| [go]”



“Excellent. Just what we needed.”

Thalia circled the first column, placed the folded sheet inside the jar and tapped it. Newt crawled into the jar at a glacial pace, as if he hoped that the kids would change their mind at any second.

“Go,” Grip instructed him with the intonation of a tutor. “Let’s do it already.”



## (Not) settled

As he was turning in his sleep, Grip opened his eyes for a moment and squinted at a paper sign on top of the cage enhanced with duct tape. Now he absolutely had to make out the **IIIIIIIIIIII** that was written on it. The messy, incomprehensible writing resisted his feeble decoding attempts until it dawned on him that it really was a hastily written “*SHHHHH*”. And, at this point, he was already too awake to fall back to sleep.

From up here, he found the lizard lying in the corner, motionless; started figuring out whether it was Newt or not, then somehow switched to worrying whether it's alive instead.

Dmytro Ivanovich peeked into the room and saw Grip lying awake. He then brought his palms together to rest his head on them, suggesting Grip to get more sleep. Grip shook his head ever so slightly. The wall concealed the bulk of the reply gesture, leaving Grip unsure what his departing boss meant by that. Ugh.

Nothing new on the phone. Might as well get up.

No matter how quiet Grip tried to be, the lizard still shook from the small thud marking his contact with floor, so he stood still for minutes to ensure it's asleep again. Grip then moved closer to observe it, ensured it's really Newt, of the newer variety. And proceeded to sit across for a long with his burgeoning thoughts never forming a single coherent idea.

Finally, he stood up, grabbed a clean suit and walked down the quiet hallways. When he passed the canteen, for the first time ever he found Thalia without her noticing him first. Her hair loose and dishevelled, her attitude quiet and sombre, she dined facing an open tube drawer, a far cry from the usual burst of energy terrorizing the crew. Grip waved her hello at half the usual speed as he passed by.

On his way back from the showers, he found Derevyashko and Thalia occupying the opposing sides of the couch, deep in their phones, not reacting much as he jumped to land between them. Where are their manners? Agents. And what's up with the hair?

*"How did it go?"* Grip asked in a very quiet voice.

*"Eh, he didn't see much,"* Thalia put visible effort into switching contexts, *"but he understood we're copying you and demanded we copy him next. And we're like, 'No', and he refused to listen."*

*"Right—"*

*"Just repeated that we don't want to."*

*"Right, and how did you explain it?"*

*"Uh, well, I basically didn't. That's the kind of stuff you excel at, so..."*

*"Didn't Irakli Kosmovich help you?"*

*"No— that was weird, actually. I thought he has a lot to ask Newt, but I got the feeling they talked just... long enough for him to check a mark, like, 'I got to talk with a lizard'."*

She interrupted for a yawn.

*"Anyway, you know this feeling, when you say something, Newt says something, you have no idea whether you're on the same page, but this time there's also Irakli Kosmovich, watching you write as if I'm a subject of an experiment."*

*"You?"*

*"That's what I said? Almost like Newt's writing's too good to be of interest. My scribbles, on the other hand..."*

*"And?"*

*"We put him in— yeah, he complained about the light, so we dimmed it, and then it was my turn to get scanned, so I don't know."*

*"Alright."*

Grip fetched himself a tube and peeked into Thalia's phone on his way back:

*"What'chu reading?"*

He tried to focus on the text she was jumping around, but when he could make out the words, they just didn't make much sense together.

*"Laws," she yawned again. "Ours."*

*"Huh?"*

*"She's estimating how much trouble she's getting in for closing a planet," Derevyashko elaborated for her. "Don't look at me like that, they have a pile of mess for laws."*

*"No, I mean, 'closing the planet'?"*

*"Ah, that idea from yesterday— weren't you the one to suggest it, actually? To cut the comms—"*

*"You did that."*

*"No, I mean, turn it back on and go 'sh-sh-sh, don't talk, just listen. This large chunk of data is Grip, then these thirty kilos are—"*

*"Irakli Kosmovich's papers," Thalia interjected.*

*"That's a good one," Derevyashko remarked after the chuckles died down. "Anyway, we all escape and then go 'nuh-uh' and shut down the comms again for good."*

*"Until they invent brain slugs of their own?"*

*"Until they fly another ship here and turn it back on. I guess," Thalia commented. "So, like, ten-thirty years later they'll be knocking on our door anyway. Maybe later. But not earlier than that."*

*"And why?"*

*"How? When there's nobody nearby."*

Grip paused to think and forgot to eat.

*"Just in case: she doesn't really mean we're pull off a twenty-eight-year-long robinsonade," Derevyashko clarified. "Just clone the lizards and kill ourselves."*

*"But that ain't much. If we don't fix their procreation, how good is that?"*

*"Very," Thalia argued. "Twenty two heads are better than eleven."*

*Chances are, they'll survive until— forget it, they'll become immortal right away."*

*"Right."*

*"We should store it somewhere safe... Yeah, and... I don't think Maria has the confidence to fix them. And we can't drag more people into it."*

*"Why not— No, I know that, but— Can we then print those who have already been here?"*

*"We're not printing people without their consent, Grip," Derevyashko made it clear it's not negotiable.*

*"Yeah," Thalia nodded. "I hope Maria won't crumble under the pressure. We're already demanding her to scan Newt without killing him, single-handedly—"*

*"You mean, four-handedly? Or should it be two-headedly?"*

*"Yeah, that'll drive her nuts quicker..."*

*"I knew there's a reason why they left her behind," Dmytro Ivanovich nodded to Grip as if they shared a secret.*

*"Who, Lisa?"*

*"Yes. 'There are no randos here, in deep space'," he quoted the classics.*

Grip immediately put his hands together as if he was in class, eager to give an answer. But after the nod of curiosity from Derevyashko, Grip named neither the book nor the movie, but rather curled his right hand in to point himself in the chest, highlighting the closest available exception to the rule. Dmytro Ivanovich was lightly amused, but did not elaborate a single bit. He looked eerily content with his mind roaming elsewhere until

actively interacted with.

*"What are we going to tell the lizards?" Thalia asked.*

*"The truth," Grip shrugged.*

*"The truth?" her eyes widened, she set the phone aside. "Better start preparing, because the truth is a bit messy. Let's see, the last time we've already revealed we know your secret, even though I don't know why make it a secret—"*

*"—cause they didn't make a secret out of it, they just thought we're the same. It wasn't secret! When he climbed into my ear to say hello, he kinda didn't expect—"*

*"—what properness has Newt broken?"*

*"Duh, made us fewer."*

*"That came up later, when the Second climbed you. Why be angry before that? Trying to enter what's already occupied?" she giggled.*

*"Well, that could be one theory."*

*"Anyway, so now we fly away. But we don't fly—"*

*"—fly, but it's not us, so—"*

*"—mean 'not us', it's us, just different us. And now we want your brains, all of them."*

*"What for?"*

*"Just in case you all die of something, but, whatever. In totally unrelated news, please line up in front of that scary machine of ours, yes, the one that's the reason you don't talk to the previous contact group any more. We actually think it's a horrible idea, so horrible, that we had a bit of a falling out with the ours, leading to all of us leave and some of us stay, so—"*



*"OK, OK, I got it. Better not bring that up at all. We want to help, so we want to copy you."*

*"We just don't, for some reason,"* she leaned back, satisfied, and picked up the phone again.

*"Look, I've been wondering,"* Grip addressed Thalia after a while.

*"How do your secrets work? What can you tell and what..."*

*"... uh, just like yours?"* his partner frowned. *"We decide what's secret and what's not at home, after the mission."*

Derevyashko raised an eyebrow at her *"at home"*, but refrained from commenting.

*"And before you return..."*

*"They control all the comms anyway?"* she returned to her reading.

*"Glad you're here as a spy, huh?"* Derevyashko asked immediately.

Grip underwent several facial expression changes before realizing the question targeted Thalia. Dmytro Ivanovich noticed that and clarified:

*"Were you two here as diplomats, you'd have your tails chewed off clean by now."*

*"Why? We've preserved the relationship."*

*"Preserved? You're about to sever it!"* he was amused. *"Should I really detail into all you did wrong— sorry, undiplomatic?"*

*"Yeah, especially given our task— and that the official diplomats were recalled already,"* Grip took it personally.

*"That was contactees, that's different. Diplomats won't even have*

*your goals from the start, they cannot do as much as sneeze in a direction ever so slightly misaligned with the line of the party.”*

*“Yeah, I just wonder how... Like, all this human stupidity we’d be using against them, they don’t even know the rules of it.”*

*“Like what? Do you know the rules of it?”*

*“Oh, it’s gonna be all those subtleties and vacuous rituals, won’t it? I don’t know, I’ve got sweets, a diplomat wants them, and then he’ll sob, grimace and never ask?”*

*“I can’t make up my mind on whether you don’t know a thing about our diplomacy, or you know it all too well,” Dmytro Ivanovich grinned.*

*“And now lizards, maybe their kids shouldn’t eat sweets, or maybe they build houses out of them, it’s gonna be even worse. And, sure, they’ll never understand our sobs and grimaces! How would we even explain our diplomacy to them?”*

*“Ah, that’s when you’d get recalled. ‘Explaining them’, unbelievable. Our diplomacy is all about extracting profit.”*

*“Look, aren’t we acing it? We’re here for three days, and the lizard begs us to let it climb into a teleport?”*

*“... or you’d be recalled on the actual day three, your corpse still warm.”*

*“One step to the right, one step to the left...” Thalia mumbled.*

*“Sure, when you try to take sweets by force—”*

*“No, you don’t get it,” she looked him in the eyes. “Diplomats are so tense, you won’t even think of doing something off-script.”*

*“Yeah, I wouldn’t make a good diplomat—”*

*“It’s not like anybody offers you to,” Derevyashko shrugged. “She*

could, though, if she wanted, she knows it from within.”  
“—not like I made a good spy anyway,” Grip concluded.  
“So, everybody is good at their own domain. Except those dangerously good at theirs,” his boss blurted ominously.

“So, my dear colleague, how does your media work?... Like, journalists—”

“—What? Better than yours,” she snickered. “That’s for sure.”

“What are you up to?” Derevyashko asked in his usual curious tone.

“Nothing yet, I’m just asking... Ever wrote any articles?”

“Uh, no?”

“OK, you sure read some?”

“I, uh, I’m not—”

“Come on. Yes, she sure had,” Derevyashko interrupted her.

“Don’t tell me you didn’t read a single one on the—”

“OK, let’s say I’ve... addressed people through media before.”

“Huh?” Grip marvelled at her constantly changing face expression.

“Wait,” she finally settled on disbelief. “Don’t tell me you never read my file.”

“Where would I get one, the comms are—”

“—you had three days to—”

“—sure Stalina wouldn’t mind sharing,” Derevyashko chimed in.

“Unbelievable... OK, it’s official,” she patted him on the shoulder,

“I hereby declare you a valenok. Through and thorough, no take backs.”

She slumped back, looking at Grip as if she saw him for the first time:

*"I thought you didn't trust me for good reasons, and you..."*

*"OK, I really didn't read your file, and I don't really want to. Just tell me what would I find there? Anyway?"*

*"Well, she's an activist,"* Dmytro Ivanovich opened the can of worms.

*"... how do you manage?"* Grip subscribed to rather peculiar Fed ideas on what constitutes activism. *"Wait, you're a spy, how can you—"*

*"Everybody knows who I am since he caught me."*

*"Right, and what are you up to? With that activism?"*

It took seconds of hard thinking for Thalia to cram her life's work into one slogan:

*"Power to the kids."*

*"What?... And... after all the sweets are captured, what's your plan?"*

*"I mean, I'll be too old for this, but maybe I can raise the right kids..."*

*"—kids, if you didn't notice— Right? What do—"*

*"Like me. Smart, caring about the future, long-term. Those who'd protect the lizards even though nobody asked— even if they'll get in trouble for it."*

*"—or bomb factories—"* Derevyashko couldn't resist adding fuel to the discussion.

*"—sure, b— What factories?... Ones producing wrong kids?"*

Grip's joke didn't fly.

*"I think it was a uranium refinery," Derevyashko felt compelled to answer. "I mean, that's none of my business; as long as it's their refineries..."*

Grip stopped to take a deep breath. Thalia hid behind her phone, making weird sliding movements across it.

*"To answer your original question, I think she's handling both jobs just fine. Mind that the life of an open agent is rather boring, so—"*

*"Boring?!"* Grip lashed out. *"I've been playing soccer on Rosario after school, just, what, last Friday? Without a care—"*

*"—could play some here, actually,—"* Thalia's attention clung to the tamest part of his outburst.

*"—Boring, huh? Not a single refinery bombed, and I'm almost eleven."*

*"You got your whole life ahead of you,"* Derevyashko suppressed a yawn.

*"OK, maybe just one question. How are you a spy, if your dad is a defector?"*

*"Why is— how are you a spy, if your dad is a dissident?"* she shrugged at him. *"How does that matter?"*

*"Hey, he's not even convicted yet,"* Dmytro Ivanovich remarked from the depths of spacing out.

Grip hid his surprise and tensed up, counting months in his head. *"Oh lemme guess, and now he'll never be,"* Thalia mocked him.

*"All hail the best court in the world."*

*"Second to yours, really,"* Derevyashko sneered. *"What are you hoping to find there anyway? We all know they'll find you guilty"*

*if they want to."*

*"Me? I'm drawing, actually."*

She turned the screen towards him, adorned by, uh...

*"What is it? Are these... eyes?"* Grip squinted at the picture.

*"Correct!"* She was so proud of herself. *"I think they'll be on stalks."*

*"... I- I don't get it."*

*"How about now?"*

Thalia added spokes to the wheels and threw in three extra lines going off-screen.

*"I'm sorry—"*

*"It's Newt! The real—"*

*"—ahh! Haha, OK, why not, but why— why the wheels?"*

The screen shook too hard from their laughter to search the picture for further clues.

*"Weren't you worried about him killing all of us? Well, he's got a lot of ground to cover in one night!"*

---

*"What would they do to me?"*

*"You? Nothing, I suppose,"* Irakli Kosmovich did not dismiss his concerns, but didn't exactly ascribe to them either. *"What could they do to a kid? That'd be a new low."*

*"Can't be what they wanted me to do. Can't be that they won't try to punish me."*

*"You will be punished, in a way."*

*"What do you mean?"*

*"Let's just say... you're well positioned to make friends with very influential people. But only if you were to give them what they want to. Or give them something and convince them it's what they always wanted."*

*"So what, what gives?"*

*"Right. Education is an obvious one, given your age. And the most useful one. Every Fed university would've considered it an honour to admit you. Who knows, maybe you could even find your way into a Fist one."*

*"And if I don't?"*

*"No, it's not like they'll ban you or anything. They're petty, but not that petty. You'll just have to make do by yourself. Same as everyone else."*

*"Doesn't sound that bad."*

*"Well, yes and no, chap. Yes and no."*

*"... Would you?... er, miss it? This place."*

*"Rather not, to be honest. I don't care much where to work from, My wife has passed away, all my kids have families of their own, so... But one thing I sure won't miss is this insane gravity."*

---

As Grip was heading down the hallway, he heard Stalina's faraway voice, asking quietly, but legibly:

*"Going recruiting, eh?"*

He froze in his tracks, turned all ears, but couldn't make a thing out of Thalia's answer:

*"???o??? ???u???"*.

Grip then slowly turned back and had relief wash over him when all he saw was an empty hallway, and there was no one to justify his pantomime to.

---

Thalia had to run almost all the way to the dome to retrieve the ball after that mighty kick of hers. Grip lowered himself onto the sand, gasping for oxygen, drenching in sweat. Outplaying Thalia wasn't fun. He might've trained all his life to play in this gravity, but not the climate. And not the suits. The very idea of playing soccer with just the two of them, on sand, under scorching sunlight, was starting to feel rather stupid in hindsight.

Thalia returned, her enthusiasm faltering as well, so she unzipped the hood and looked the same direction.

*"What's up?"*

*"Is that another cactus?"*

*"What else? Could it be?"*

*"Has it always been there?"*

*"Uh, yeah? It's just far— You might've never stood on this side o—"*

*"—likely. Wanna check it out?"*

*"Uh. Whatever."*

Shortly after they've passed the solar panel array. Thalia gave up and picked up the ball. Yet the cactus looked only a hair taller than before.

---



*"I have to tell you one important thing. If your disagreement with the Federation reaches critical levels, the Fist would be happy to see you. Any embassy, anytime."*

Grip never saw a single embassy in his life. To think of it, he was pretty confident Rosario had none.

*"... don't get me wrong, you're unmatched with lizards, but I just don't think you're cut out for this line of work. I'd be happy to see you join our movement though."*

*"This activism thing?..."*

*"Yeah, I think you'd fit in..."* she trailed off. *"I wish Lora was here."*  
*"Lora?"*

*"You don't know her; she's, like, just loves those dilemmas and stuff. She'd know what to do in an instant, and then be so... ardent about it... And I'm more of an action girl, you know."*

*"Huh. I thought you must be the leader o—"*

*"No-no-no, heh. I'm not,"* she began to zip up. *"There aren't that many of us anyway."*

---

*"At last,"* she exhaled when they finally reached the cactus.

Grip fumbled with his hood, so he missed this remark of hers.

*"Do you think it'd be taller than ours,"* she continued, *"if it weren't chewed up so mer—"*

*"Quiet!"*

While tugging on the zip, Grip turned his head an odd angle and noticed some sand movement to the side. He stopped to examine it intently, and the sand dweller lost the staring contest to dig

itself even deeper.

*"They're watching us. We should—"*

*"—about to leave anyway."*

They turned back with exaggerated smoothness and began retracing their steps.

---

*"So, you're worried about the court?"*

*"Co— A tribunal, you mean. I'll be tried separately."*

*"Yes, the trial."*

*"Derevyashko's right,"* she admitted reluctantly. *"It's entirely up to them. But I can't imagine just... uh... And you?"*

*"Not really,"* Grip shrugged.

*"Good. Good."*

---

*"Got a minute?"*

*"Sure, sure."*

Grip decided it must be extremely important if Irakli Kosmovich stopped him in a hallway like this.

*"So, I've looked up the oath, and it explicitly states—"*

*"The what?"*

*"The military oath. The pledge you gave to defend the Federation from— gimme a second."*

Grip decided against telling him he was never under any oath to begin with.

*"So, here, 'solemnly swear, la-la-la... and faithfully defend the*

*Federation from any threat, external or otherwise'. Meaning you could own it up and stick to the 'oh, that thing that killed me? No, sorry, left it back there. I can't let it roam the brains of the peaceful Fe—'*

*"Right, right," Grip nodded vigorously. "Makes sense."*

*"—lost my life to learn it poses a threat to humanity, oh, and I was then told it's as deadly for all of us, as—"*

*"—so that's why I've done all I could to prevent it from spreading to other planets from this disastrous..."*

*"Precisely. All 'without ill will'. I'm not a lawyer, but, just a thought."*

*"That's interesting, that could come handy. I'll keep that in mind. Anything else— Thank you then, thank you! Sorry, I'm in a dire need of a shower right now."*

---

*"I've gathered y'all here today—" Derevyashko began loudly.*

*"—whoa, whoa," Maria assumed a comfier position. "Calm down. Who do you think you are?"*

*"Look, I've got nothing to do and no skin in the game. I hope you've now processed the events of yesterday, you've calmed down, and we could finally make a decision. First, I would like all of you to tell what you think about the situation. One by one. Lisa."*

*"I, uh," Lisa was as prepared to give speeches as everyone else in the room. "Look, I... I know I've been a mess recently, and none of it actually made any sense, but, weirdly enough, now*

when I've met Dima... it kinda snapped into place. I stayed here for a reason, and found my purpose— to help Maria —so completing this is... what I'm gonna do? And the other me could finally return, finish my studies, I hope, live a real life. And if I need to split to reconnect— to become whole again...”

She rambled on and on, and Grip tried to find consoling in that the others were just as uncomfortable as he was. He then remembered what does it remind him of: that time when Mitya pulled Farida's braids so hard she burst into tears, and Violetta Petrovna made him explain to the class why did he think that was a good idea. Watching him squirm and mumble something incoherent was basically collective punishment in itself, leaving them all to wonder what did they do wrong for them to endure it.

“... and I don't see how it's less important than I am, so yes. I agree,” she finished her speech without ever specifying what does she agree with.

“Thank you,” was everything “Dima” could muster.

They've processed it for a while in silence, making it her turn to squirm and blush.

“Alright, who's next?” Irakli Kosmovich broke the silence.

“Sure, go ahead,” Dmytro Ivanovich came back to his senses and turned towards him.

“I'll be brief... Grip is right. And we also cannot leave the lizards like this. Do what you must, but I don't want that on my conscience. Let me leave first. And then raise a generation of kids who'd make me even more proud than the two of you.

That's it."

"We'll see. Maria?"

"Grip is wrong, like, fundamentally. You all just don't get it. Newt's scan is not a magic wand of mind control. It might be the key to what you'd call sentience itself. For science, it's a treasure trove of everything, good and bad if you're stuck with such a simplistic world-view, but nature, nature knows no good or bad. They live in lizards, yet none of you condemns that somehow? I bet you'd be appalled by mind-controlling humans, elephants or growlicks, but you draw the line at lizards? Your shaky moral— This just isn't how it works. You don't get to pick—you don't get to ban knowledge itself. You don't get to stop the march of progress. And delaying it is pointless as well. Make controlling people a crime if you can, but keep your hands away from studying it. And even if your crazy plan worked, all you'd accomplish was sabotaging zoology, neurochemistry. Everything."

"And somebody," Lisa interjected quietly. "Somebody out there will die because of something we didn't learn today?"

"Well put. Thank you. I'd just stress this isn't a narrow setback. It would impact the entire humanity."

"Alright, I think you've made your point. Stalina?"

"Grip is wrong," the door frame dweller made several steps towards the group. "But not because the march of progress or mysterious ways of science — it's just not up for him to decide, simple as that."

"And who do you think gets to decide?" Thalia erupted. "DFA, DoX? KGB? A joint ethics committee?"

"Please await your turn," Derevyashko insisted quietly.

"Excellent question. I don't know," Stalina stated, unfazed. "But I know it's not you. Not him. Not me. So, what we must do now is to turn on the comms and let the right people handle it. If it is a job for an ethics committee, they should sit down and decide. Listen, I'm not going to stop you. I can even volunteer to be the last one. But I need you to know you're making a huge mistake."

"Loud and clear. Are you done? Thalia."

"And you know what their decision will be!"

"I have my suspicions, yes," Stalina smirked.

"The nerve..." Thalia shook her head. "OK, you know my stance. Grip's right. Let's do it."

"Uh, alright. Grip."

"Ahem. So, first of all. Those agreeing with me, those disagreeing with me. Could you first kindly— articulate it, is that a word in English?"

"It sure is," Irakli Kosmovich nodded. "And that's likely my fault, overdoing the brevity. What I meant by agreeing with you, was not letting the scan leave this planet."

"Same," Thalia chimed in.

"Second, it's not my plan. It's not even a plan if it doesn't have steps. What are those steps? What are we discussing?"

"Not like we have many options," Lisa nodded. "We send ourselves back, but leave copies— originals... behind. With the comms shut down, they scan Newt. Save the lizards. What do

you— what would you let us do differently?”

“You don’t like the suicide part. Can it be done without suicide?”

“How?”

“I don’t know, I’m just— say, send ourselves back, but it’s our old scans.”

“And?” the crew struggled to comprehend his idea.

“And here we just live, until we die, so, no suicide.”

“Please, just kill me right away,” Maria exhaled.

“Our inevitable insanity aside”, Irakli Kosmovich shook his head,

“I’m in awe at the deviousness of sending back the scans they already have.”

“Yeah, that’d be a top-notch twist,” Derevyashko nodded. “For a mystery psychodrama. ‘Who killed Grip?’ — ‘What??’ — ‘Why did you close the planet?’ — ‘We did what???’ I can almost see the headlines: ‘Mystery of the abandoned planet’.”

“‘Lizard planet’,” Thalia corrected.

“And you?” Maria addressed Dmytro. “Where’s your monologue?”

“I’m nobody. I’m not even here,” he made silly passes with his hands.

“Stop it. You’re clearly dissociate, and stupid jokes are not the help you need right now,” she pursed her lips.

“OK, if you don’t want a better plan, we can do the one we have,” Grip leaned back, disappointed and offended. “I’m OK with changes. We just must not scan until we close the planet.”

“I’m terribly sorry, but how does one ‘close a planet’?” Lisa made a circular gesture.

“They ‘open’ them in Russian, so, ‘undiscover’ is what he meant,” Thalia was quick to explain.

“One cannot undiscover anything,” Maria groaned. “They know where it is. They’ll be here again in fifteen years.”

“Then we’ll have fifteen years to figure it out,” Thalia insisted.

“Yes. What she said,” Grip nodded. “We’re not ready.”

“Close the planet,” Irakli Kosmovich chuckled. “Farah’s gonna eat you alive.”

“Our Farah?” Dmytro Ivanovich gawked at him. “Nah, she’ll come up wi—”

“No, their Farah,” Thalia ‘clarified’. “A linguist. You know what I don’t hear?”

“OK, I’ll bite,” Derevyashko leaned towards her. “What is it that you don’t hear?”

“Objections! Na-na-na-na-na—” she raised her palms towards Maria and Stalina. “I heard you. Progress. Mandates. Huge mistake. I can live with that. But then you say you’ll do it! That’s— all I’m asking for!”

“And you?” Maria played what she thought was an ace up her sleeve.

“Me? What about me?” Grip squirmed.

“Will you kill yourself for this plan of yours?”

“Yes,” Grip answered without a thought in the world and then frowned a little.

Something was off about the word that just rolled off his tongue. Back in a dark corner of his mind, an everlasting imprint of a



different Maria — Maria Stepanovna — shook her head in disapproval.

“Yes, I will,” he corrected himself to not omit the auxiliary.

---

“Why are you here?” the kids barged into Maria’s room. She paused some old show on her phone and gave them a tired look.

“What do you want from me? I’m taking a day off.”

“Shouldn’t you rather be in the lab?”

“What for? Would you let me scan him?”

“No—”

“—but shouldn’t you be preparing—”

“How?”

“Do you wanna come with us and see him leave the body?” Grip played his strongest card, and that left Maria hesitate for a second.

“Nah.”

“Really?!”

“What would you want me to see without a scanner? The outer colour?”

“What if it’s transparent?”

“I need a good look at its brains. Call me when you’re done tying my hands.”

“Right. Another thing then. Can you print me freeze, but for the other lizard?” Grip asked.

“OK? That I can print without getting up,” she made a quick series

of taps and brought the show back.

“Thank you very much! And now, while it’s printing, could you just answer some questions?”

“Fi-ne, but keep it quick. What do you want to know?”

“The biggest problem is how to freeze the brain—”

“No, the biggest problem is kickstarting it back.”

“Wha— Can you explain it, but super simple?”

“Sure,” she sighed. “Cause all of that is simple... We don’t know how to restart any brain.”

“But, but...” Thalia uttered. “What about us? We—”

“We know human brain does start up and looks mostly fine. But don’t get an idea that’s because we shut it down cleanly and know the secret initialization sequence. In fact, we’re confident there is none. We know we don’t shut it down right, it just happens to work almost every time, so we’re doing it anyway.”

“Almost.”

“That’s why you shouldn’t save or hop often. It’s like you take a hit to your entire brain at once, you just don’t get to remember how—”

“Can’t be...” Thalia refused to believe her. “We hop all the time. And we’re all fine.”

“—and it’s kinda fine, but I can’t just assume it’d work for Newt.”

“I... see,” Grip kept Thalia away from the conversation. “And all the other animals, do their brains start fine?”

“Copied as is, they manifest symptoms of distress— for humans we know how to make it go smoother —otherwise... hard to tell. When everything’s done right, they do function, and they do get

to keep at least some memory. We don't know. We can't just ask them if they remember everything. Or people, for that matter..."

"Thank you very much. It's been— Now I see why you—"

"Yes, yes. Could you please leave me alone now?"

---

"You again?"

"What would happen if it— a lizard falls from... this high?"

"What do you think will happen? It will get hurt!"

"Ugh!" Grip was disappointed, but resolved. "OK!..."

---

*"Hold it tigh— ugh! I will never hit the vein if you keep doing this!"*

Grip dashed into the room and pressed the hand holding the shocked, still squirming lizard against the cage.

*"Watch this!"*

He had Newt's undivided attention indeed. Grip then raised his arm and dropped the lizard onto the bed with a quiet thump. Once it stopped moving, he grabbed it again and demonstrated its twisted immobilized body to both Newt and wide-eyed Thalia. Newt instinctively ducked and made a step back with a slight turn.

*"See? That's what gonna happen if you fall!"*

Grip put the lizard back to its jar.

"Dude..." Thalia shook her head in awe.

"[go] [down'] [be-danger]"

"[you] [go-?] [down']" Grip scribbled on the paper and pressed it

against the glass.

“[I] [go-not] [down’]

|[do-exist-not] [be-less-er] [I’]” was Newt’s immediate answer.

“No! I don’t want to kill you!” Grip snapped.

“But what did you expect?” Thalia groaned with a sob. “You can’t just barge in and threaten to kill his... body? Absolutely unprovoked—”

“*That’s not what I meant!*” Grip shook his arms.

“Wooo...” Thalia exhaled loudly. “*Look, if there were rules for explaining such basic things to the counterparty who was first exiled, and then you abducted it, I’d love to help,*” she kept giggling. How very unprofessional of her. “*But look at the bright side of things, OK? He might’ve misunderstood you, but I’m sure he’s not gonna jump down any ceilings after this... highly accessible demonstration of yours.*”

“*Fine then,*” Grip opened the lid and bent over to extract poor Newt.

“*What’chu doing?!*”

“*Touring the base, of course! Or he just won’t stop badgering us about objects!*”

He left the room with Newt on his right shoulder, and Thalia following him in lockstep, her left arm ready to catch the lizard.

---

“*And one more thing.*”

“*Yes?*”

“*Goodbye. I can’t take it any more, I’m gonna leave while you’re*

out.”

“... OK. When she called you a dissociate—”

“I always knew I’m not fit for this... Yes. Now I’ve got proof I never needed.”

“You did what you needed to do. Solved my murder.”

“Right. If there’s anything else I can help with, or you’re just bored, don’t you dare print me,” Dmytro put on a thin-lipped smile. “Sort it out yourself somehow.”

---

“This is getting out of hand,” Thalia declared.

Two large lizards awaited them at the centre. As soon as the kids sat down, all three lizards started rattling. Thalia closed her eyes, as if that let her make anything out of this cacophony. Grip could single out Newt with ease — he clicked right next to his ear, — but the click decoder inside his sleepy head has stalled and went up in flames.

“[do-wait]” he wrote on the sand in front of him, and one of the lizards even reacted.

It went quiet, walked onto to the glyph, inspected it from different angles and demonstratively wiped it with a swipe of its tail.

A minute later, the rattling stopped as abruptly as it started.

“[yous] [can] [exist’] [be-two] [be-new’]

[yous] [want-not-?] [exist’] [be-two] [be-new’]” one of them asked after a silent staredown with Newt on Grip’s shoulder.

“[I] | [want]” Grip wrote as a sidenote, wiped a large patch of sand

and covered it with a detailed answer:

“[exist] [be-one] [be-new’]  
| [exist] [up-in] [sun’]  
| [exist] [down-in] [sun’]  
| [exist] [up-in] [sun’]  
| [exist] [down-in] [sun’]  
| [exist] [up-in] [sun’]  
| [exist] [down-in] [sun’]  
| [exist] [be-two] [be-new’]”

One lizard stared at him intently, while the second (Second?) one replied:

“[exist-not] [be-two] [be-new’] [do-exist] [be-two] [be-new’]  
| [yous] [do-go-not] [here’] [yous] [do-go] [here’]”

Two clicks, and they both ran away towards their airlock.

“*Fair,*” Grip stated, taking another prolonged glance at their conversation.

---

“*That’s a bit awkward,*” Stalina awaited them at the ship.

“*They just don’t want to talk to us until we bring them two Newts.*”

“*I mean, Dmytro is still here. You’d better not run into him.*”

“... and? What do you propose, to wait it out here?” Grip refrained from rubbing his eyes with the hand he held Newt with. “*I’m heading straight to bed anyway.*”

---

“*Here you go,*” he tried to placed Newt back into the cage.

Newt didn't plan to part with his hand and kept clicking in a funky rhythm. Grip's click decoding hasn't recovered, so he tried another strategy.

"No," he said, holding Newt as if he was a microphone. "Wait." He then put him onto the sand and texted Thalia: "He wants something again."

"[you] [want] [...'-?]" he wrote and pointed on the sand.

"[do-show] | [objects]"

Grip let out a groan of frustration.

"OK, *what else does he want?*" Thalia ran in and bent over the cage to read.

"*He's at it again. Look, sorry, I don't care any more, I'm going to sleep,*" Grip closed the lid, a gesture Newt didn't appreciate.

"*I've been awake since—*"

"*Seriously? Are you dumping him on me? What am I supposed to do? He's not gonna sleep—*"

"*I don't know what else does he want from me, OK? Just ignore him...*"

Grip climbed onto the bed.

"... *We've showed him everything, even the pods. Even the showers. I'm out of ideas. Just leave him here, throw in some flies, maybe, and go get some sleep,*" he suggested and closed his eyes.

He briefly woke up again when Thalia and Stalina carried the cage away, but just closed his eyes and ignored it.

---

At first, he couldn't fathom what is he looking at. And, once he figured it out, he couldn't contain his laughter. The cage was back, and so was Newt. And the glowing thing was a phone. Propped up against a tiny sandhill, it featured colourful shapes that the lizard popped with his nose. Once Grip started his "rejoicing", Newt decided to pretend the phone has nothing to do with him and laid down facing the other way, as the newly appearing shapes covered the entire screen. A manoeuvre that didn't help Grip's receding composure in the slightest.

---

*"Where are you?"*

Oh, a "please call back" from Dan? What could he possibly want? Grip basically forgot Dan and Lee existed. He turned into an unused room.

"Hi, colleague!"

"Uh? Morning, colleague."

"I'm gonna tell you first, I'm gonna miss this planet. Best assignment I've ever had, and that was before you two arrived. Hope we'll cross paths again someday.

"Uh, OK, thank you."

"Now, there's this 'closing the planet' idea floating around, and seems like none of you understand how it actually works. Subliminals aside, there are bulk transfers and then there's a control channel to orchestrate'em. You'll need it anyway to flush us out. It's a tried and true signalling protocol, my point is, that one's fully manual and limited to 160 symbols— even fewer



if you use those letters of yours with wider codepoints –so–”

“–Dan–”

“–that scan you’re so–”

“–Dan.”

“What?”

“I’m sorry, I don’t even understand what you say.”

“I was about to tell you, I can give you direct access to–”

“Why are you telling me this? I’m leaving.”

“Man... I’m talking to the you who stays! I’m leaving now–”

“Can you give this... access to Thalia instead?”

“OK, wow.”

On the other end of the line, Dan took a few second to compose himself, and then proceeded with admiration in his voice:

“If you say so– I mean, I heard you two trust each other, but...”

“I trust her. Just give it to her.”

“I just did, to both of you. So, alrighty then! It’s been a pleasure, colleague. Dan’s out.”

OK, but where is she?

---

On his way to the canteen, he overtook Stalina and Irakli at first, but then stuck with them to listen:

“–it down for me? You found some archaic unused cases?”

“Sorry, it’s not cases. There’s a good reason I keep calling them ‘declension systems’.”

“And they...”

“Used to have at least two that later merged– morning, Grip.”

*"Morning."*

*"And you've spent all night talking about... case systems?"*

*"No, just for a few hours. I need my sleep as much as everybody does. Grip, you sure remember that lizard koan of theirs: 'The wise knows the angles, the wise knows what to do'."*

*"Yeah!"*

*"Guess what, 'Wise' is a—"*

*"—a name?"*

*"Gives a whole new dimension to the 'others want to be wise' column, doesn't it?"*

*"So Newt picks younger lizards, and Wise picks brainier ones?"*

*"I guess First, Second and Third are not a picky bunch."*

*"There's a Third?"*

*"But not a Fourth. I'm not entirely sure these three are regular names though."*

*"I'm sorry, that's super interesting, but I've got one important thing to do."*

Grip jumped at Lisa, Maria and Thalia chatting in the canteen:

*"Why are you here?"*

*"As opposed to?"* Maria turned to him.

*"The lab! You had a day off, but we really, really have to start today—"*

*"I'm sorry, have you left already?"*

*"No, but—"*

*"—I had,"* Lisa raised her hand merrily.

*"Then go ahead, form a queue, leave, and then we'll talk,"* Maria was pulling out her phone with one hand and making inviting

gestures towards Stalina with the free one. “Until then, I’m taking all the rest I can get. So, when I said ‘bikes on tracks’ yesterday, that was precisely what I meant. Bikes, on tank tracks,” she showed her the picture. “Yes, they do exist.”

“OK, wow—”

“I know.”

“... I mean... nice, but, at this rate, might as well go for hovers.”

“What are you gonna do with a hover, they—”

“Where have you been? Why don’t you reply?” Grip switched to Thalia.

She burst into laughter, interrupting the hovers discussion:

“That’s— that’s probably for the better that you got no reply— because that’d be—”

“Wait,” his face dropped. “Your phone, it can contact Fist. Direct— ...ly.”

That was the first time Grip saw a cyborg sprint.



## **(Not) cultured**

Grip felt awesome. He escaped the exhausting frenzy and soared in fuzzy warmth. After what felt like a day of sleep, he could move mountains again. His entire body felt lighter, ready to spring into action.

The suit went missing. The room was unfamiliar, cosy and creepy, liveable, but uninhabited. Hundreds of pictures were plastered around the walls so densely, it was impossible to throw a pillow without hitting one, only the corner above his bed was spared from this fate. Massive furniture did not feature a single straight line, as if its designer lost a bet or something. At the foot of the bed there was a bag that mom packed for him: school uniform, underwear, shoes. A carafe of water and a glass decorated the table across. No phone, nothing.

Grip slid behind the heavy curtain to take a look outside. No snow, no skyscrapers. He was at around third or second floor,

looking at a neighbouring three-storey grey building. There was, like, fifteen meters of pointless grass between them, and a fence at least one storey tall. It wasn't a house across the street, the street was somewhere to the left, home to some commotion. A figure in a bright yellow suit was standing in the middle of the street, people walked past... all of that was barely visible without opening the window.

As Grip was putting his shoes on, one of the pictures caught his eye, a person on it, to be specific. Strangely enough, Ilya Ilyich Svobodin wasn't the centrepiece of the picture. He extended his hand outwards, trying to make some fat, unpleasant-looking woman turn around and look the way he wanted. The woman looked into the camera instead. Svobodin was much more human than his usual portraits: an irritated man, but a recognizeable one.

He scanned another dozen of the pictures. The exhibition revolved around that woman. Here she is on some construction site, now she's on a porch, and here she accepts some award. She was the only one reliably looking at the camera, others mostly didn't. At least that suggested she was well aware somebody's taking photos of her. Here she is with a toddler who's, like, three; here's she with a small baby; and here's with a large entourage — right, and Svobodin, saw that one already.

Grip sneaked out to the hallway. Similar rooms to the left... a staircase to the right looked like a much more promising way out of here. It then turned left into some... hall, since it must've

featured some enormously tall ceilings, a hall with yellow light and people chatting. Pretentious decor and sky-high ceilings made Grip glance upwards for wax dripping down from candles. Nope, just your garden variety glowing ceiling. Meaning this castle must have electricity already.

Grip remembered his lesson and stopped before the turn of the staircase to tune into the discussion:

*“—all in Stroich’s hands now. With luck, we’re off the hook, worst case we’re disbanded. Whoever finishes first wins,”* an unknown voice droned.

*“And them?”* Derevyashko asked.

*“What do you think? DoX is, predictably, furious. Diplomats are dancing can-can, of course, not every year they get such a present.”*

*“No, I mean—”*

*“Not yet, like, why rush it now? A day or two won’t make a difference. Couldn’t you close some other planet?”* the voice continued, and Grip began to recall it. *“So many of them with no sentient life, just pick any... Now you more productive at that than the entire min’o’search has ever been, over the entire expanse. In absolute value.”*

Both went quiet to listen to another voice. Could be Irakli Kosmovich, but Grip couldn’t make out a word.

*“And so are we, you know... Ah, forget it,”* the other voice continued after a while. Grip remembered whose voice it was. He was there with them when they departed. *“So you’re not going to Voronovs?”*

*“Fiona’s gonna incinerate me with her gaze. Why are you wondering?”*

*“So, what was this place you were so adamant about?”*

*“—really—”*

*“A haven panorama, you say? Now, after Grip—”*

*“—the burgers, I say. Panorama is great, but not as great as—”*

*“Yuck.”*

*“Doesn’t count until you’ve tasted it.”*

*“I’ve already agreed, OK? Come out, Grip, it’s you spying on us, isn’t it?”*

Grip went to the centre of the hall, puzzled about what gave him away. Aksat Dzhonatanovich and Dmytro Ivanovich sat at a small table, Irakli Kosmovich read a book in a far corner, and Stalina Filantievna looked like she passed out on a couch.

*“Hello. Good morning or day.”*

*“Good morning,”* Irakli Kosmovich responded.

*“Hi,”* Aksat Dzhonatanovich nodded.

*“Good day,”* Derevyashko greeted him.

*“Are we guests at Thalia’s? Where’s the dragon imprisoned in the tower by the princess?”*

*“You mi—”* Aksat Dzhonatanovich began.

*“Oh no, am I late?”* Grip gasped in mock disappointment.

*“Bummer. Who’s Fiona?”*

*“Thalia’s mom. Why a dragon?”* Derevyashko acted curious, as always.

*“Why are we in some kind of castle?”* Grip nodded at the ceiling



first and chair second.

*"Ah, don't bother. Diplomats are weird. Just in case, I'm the real one."*

*"Then go ahead,"* Aksat Dzhonatanovich nodded. *"Instruct him, if you're real."*

*"What's there to instruct about?"* Derevyashko blanked out.

*"Oh, here we go again,"* Aksat Dzhonatanovich turned to Grip himself. *"While the law allows for deferring your printing up to seventy-two hours without ever explaining anything, you have to be notified afterwards."*

*"And how long have I been collecting dust?"*

*"Seventy. Now tell me this, what were you thinking with?"*

Derevyashko stared at his lunge disapprovingly. Grip kept silence for a bit, then grumbled:

*"If you have specific questions, go ahead and ask them."*

*"There sure will be tons of specific questions later today, at the inquest. Just tell me like it is, why did you have to save everyone, whenever they wanted to be saved or not?"*

*"Why did you send me then? If you wanted me to make decisions, I made the right ones."*

*"Then get ready to explain how are they the right ones,"* Aksat Dzhonatanovich softened under Derevyashko's stink eye.

*"At the inquest?"*

*"Both at the inquest, and to your fans in general."*

*"To whom?"*

Aksat Dzhonatanovich approached the window and drew the dense curtain open. Grip jumped up and perched on his hands

on the window sill. First he read the glowing slogans on the protestors' signs. The following schools of thought dominated the streets: a bit of "COMMIE DISSOCIATES CLOSED OUR PLANET" here and there, quite a few variations on "SEND THE SHIPS! NOW!", but most of them spelled out "FREE THE KIDS".

*"Why in English?"*

*"Welcome to New Amsterdam, Grip Avdotievich. You're here for the inquest into your recent achievements—"*

*"And that inquestioning—"*

*"A joint one."*

*"A-ah."*

*"The mission was a joint one—"*

*"A-ah."*

*"—and so is the inquest. Started at ours, ended at theirs. And not in the way we planned it to."*

Done with the signs, Grip stared at the motley garments and bright hair of the protestors. The crowd didn't march or anything like Federation ones did, it didn't look organized at all. People just stood there, talked to each other, scurried around. There were many kids among them; someone came with a pram, some kids ran around, a few sat on their parent's necks, a toddler waved a small sign of his own. But now the crowd noticed Grip in the window. A wave washed over the signs, people drifted closer to the building, shouting something, but Grip didn't hear them, he didn't even look. His undivided attention went to the greasy fellow at the back, more specifically, at the kid

who toppled back and tumbled down from his shoulder as he lurched forward. Grip screamed internally, but the kid didn't just survive, she took to her heels and gleefully escaped her hapless parent, forcing him into chasing her on the other side of the street, his "FREE THE KIDS" sign swinging in his hand.

*"Climb down, don't instigate the populace for nothing."*

*"Which side do they want me to climb down?"* Grip obeyed and lowered himself to the floor.

*"As if they know what they want."*

*"Yeah, I think it's clear from the signs that they don't know what do they want,"* Grip stepped aside.

Irakli Kosmovich wore a sad smile.

*"Don't worry,"* Derevyashko giggled. *"The vast majority of them don't want to crucify you—"*

*"Most just want to crucisix?"*

*"—crown you—"*

*"—but why—"*

*"Because,"* Aksat Dzhonatanovich couldn't contain himself.

*"Apparently one can get out of bed, put on their pants, not forget the sign, but forget to turn on their heads!"*

*"And how many of them want me back at school, far away from here?"*

*"They might be all united in that, actually,"* Dmytro Ivanovich said thoughtfully.

*"Both fans, and fans in the absolute value. Do you know what absolute values are? Attaboy."*

*"OK, and what does our crowd want?" Grip wondered.*

*Derevyashko snorted quietly.*

*"There's no 'our crowd'," he clarified. "They don't really know much about you. And when they will, we'll control the narrative."*

*"Awesome," Grip replied, uplifted. "What's that 'inqueting' thing, a trial?"*

*"Kind of," Derevyashko nodded. "It's not that straightforward. They want to talk before pressing charges, so that they know what to accuse you of. And whether they want to."*

*"Free the kids, please. Oh wait, that means it's inclusive of Thalia?"*

*"Yeah, she's in a similar situation. Don't worry, she's got her own support group."*

*"Oh yeah, I wanna join, give me a sign," Grip rolled his eyes. "Hands off the thistle, people."*

*"Why so rude?" Irakli Kosmovich smiled.*

*"Oh, that's a compliment, given her profession. She'd be the one standing with a sign until she passes out."*

*"Somebody explain me one thing," Irakli Kosmovich continued.*

*"What makes them think it's their planet to begin with?"*

*"Why, they were the ones who discovered it," Aksat Dzhonatanovich missed the point.*

*"Hello? Lizards called," Grip reminded him.*

*"Doesn't matter," he replied. "There this issue with people: once they consider something theirs, they won't part with it. Even if for two of the same."*

*"Well, now it's time to reconsider,"* Grip insisted.

*"But if there's something cute, they'll drop everything and protect it. Whatever singing snails it would be."*

*"Are there singing snails?"* Derevyashko wondered.

*"—protect some birds,"* Irakli Kosmovich sighed.

*"From what?"* Aksat Dzhonatanovich asked without being specific.

*"From the wind,"* Grip concluded.

*"Yeah, just make a sign about 'protecting snails from the wind', and they'll follow. Like I said, zero brain participation—"*

*"I thought we're discussing birds,"* Dmytro Ivanovich spoke absentmindedly. *"Who knows what are they chirping about with snails. Could be sentient. Let's cede the Earth, just in case."*

*"Stand down, no need to protect birds,"* Aksat Dzhonatanovich clarified. *"Everybody knows there are no birds, just secret guard drones. And, since they work for the secret guard, that rules out sentience."*

Someone chuckled behind the wall.

*"Come on, Marek, smack him with something,"* Stalina spoke for the first time.

A man who entered the room was a short, though still taller than Grip, but otherwise rather unassuming. His grey suit only made him blander. Instead of educating people through violence, he walked to the window and drew the curtain close.

*"I'd like to ask you to not do this,"* his soft voice addressed nobody in particular.

Grip suddenly realized what's wrong with him: his gait, it was too

normal. Marek walked like lower gravity didn't extend to him.

Dmytro Ivanovich was checking his ancient watch.

*"And the minutes? Every time you hop you also..."* Grip began to compile a question.

*"... Ah! Yeah, right. I have to set it every time anyway, since the time's different."*

*"Ah, right."*

*"We're gotta go,"* Derevyashko squirmed, *"So that we don't hurry later."*

*"I'm going with you,"* Grip squatted on his heels, sprang upwards and jumped higher than he stood. *"But I need some anchor, like you have,"* he looked at Marek. *"Otherwise you set me free and I'll fly away. Like a snail in the wind."*

His bosses hesitated.

*"Grip, no offence, please..."* Aksat Dzhonatanovich began.

*"Wait, I can't go? Free the kids!"*

*"Why, no, you're free to go where you want—"*

*"First time on New Amsterdam, and go to a burger joint,"* Derevyashko shook his head. *"That's kinda lame. Start with the tourist staples while you've got time: parks, Highrise, along the coast—"*

*"Gates!"* Aksat Dzhonatanovich added.

*"Don't go past the Gates though."*

*"—nah, that one's bigger than Maksimka,"* Marek talked with thin air.

*"Aren't you afraid that I'll run away?"* Grip asked.

*"No—"* Dmytro Ivanovich smiled.

*"Where to? It's New Amsterdam," Aksat Dzhonatanovich frowned. "There are cams everywhere. But please don't be late for the inquest."*

*"How would I come out though?" Grip's freedom-induced confidence evaporated. "They're out there," he gestured vaguely.*

*"Just like this," Aksat Dzhonatanovich found it funny. "You think these fighters for your freedom won't let you out? Also, tell them—"*

*"You'd rather not," Marek objected softly.*

*"Yeah, by the way," Derevyashko addressed him. "Could you give us a car, or a lift?"*

*"You can just use the subway," Marek shrugged. "Let me—"*

*"Oh really? Nice."*

But first they let a woman into the room. She was similarly short and disrespectful to the local gravitational customs and traditions.

*"Come in,"* she unfolded a long black trench coat in front of Grip. It weighed about as much as Grip himself, greatly restricting his movement.

*"See! It fits alright,"* she exclaimed.

*"And where would I go to in this?..."*

*"Let's go to a mall,"* she suggested. *"That'd take the rest of day."* Grip knew this word, but it translated as a "shopping centre", which didn't spark any joy. Getting stuck there for the entire day was even less appealing. The coat worked wonders against compulsive shrugging.

*"Nah. I don't want to."*

*"Whatever,"* she replied and left.

Grip walked around the room, sat down. The book's stylish cover caught his eye.

*"Irakli Kosmovich, is that a textbook?"*

He raised it higher, so that it's visible more clearly. The back featured a giant "[do-think]", the front had a matching "[signs']". But that made them rotated wrong. Like in school.

*"Yes, a fresh one."*

*"Isn't it a bit too late for you?"*

*"It's never too late to study,"* he made notes right in the book.

*"They waste no time either, now they're teaching kids to think in lizard. Have you ever?"*

*"In isolated words,"* Grip reflected. *"How else would I think about them? I can think in English, as long as I don't run out of words, but lizard has very few of them."*

*"Isolated words, is it rattling or translations?"*

*"Translations."*

*"And they want to cut straight to rattling... Sounds ambitious."*

*"We didn't study sounds at all, I just... And you, do you think? In lizard."*

*"I also don't rattle inside my head, it's enough for me to know the bijection exists... I pronounce the bases in English, but I also spell out each link and stroke separately, in their writing order, not the newfangled way... So, take you, Thalia and me, we all pronounce it differently."*

*"Interesting... Do they teach how to write in joint? Outwards."*



*That's something we needed right away."*  
*"You know, they do not, for some reason..."*  
*"Do you want to go for a walk?"*  
*"Sorry, not really. I've been here before, I don't think it has changed much."*

With no company, no phone—no watch, even,—Grip didn't want to roam who knows where. So he just sat there in this iron coat.

*"Are you gonna sit here, like a poor cousin?"* Marek came back.  
*"Don't wanna go to the mall? Pay Voronovs a visit. A friend, after all."*  
*"Voronovs? Are we allowed to? I mean, shouldn't they separate and interrogate us one by one?"*  
*"What? No, nothing like this. They'll bring you together anyway."*  
*"Do I have the time to?"*  
*"Yeah, even if you walk, they live nearby."*  
*"Won't Thalia's mother ignite me with her gaze?"*  
*"Sheesh!"* Marek was amused. *"Fiona is a lady of exquisite manners, rest assured she's incapable of igniting anyone. Only pressing. Do you know Fiona as well?"*  
*"No, just Martin—"*  
*"O-oh, come on, why be so shy then? It's Martin Aleksandrovich, an all-around larger-than-life sweetie pie. Especially since you know each other already."*

Grip blanked out for a while. He was busy applying "larger-than-life" and "sweetie pie" to the respectable, reserved man who hasn't even said a word around him.

*“Are you sure we’re talking about the same Martin Aleksandrovich?”* he doubted in the quiet.

*“One is enough,”* Marek didn’t understand him. *“Where have you seen him, Federation?”*

*“Yeah, on Arkadia.”*

*“Well, that explains it. He’s, obviously, not welcome there, no wonder he wore a sour face.”*

A “sour face” fit Grip’s idea of Thalia’s dad about as well as “larger-than-life” and “sweetie pie”.

*“Alright,”* Grip made the decision. *“Will you show me the way? Cause I don’t have a—”*

*“Why, off-peak, we can accompany you there... that’d be easier. Lora, could you walk this fella to Voronovs?”*

The same woman has entered the room, as if she was waiting for the invitation, but only to glance at Grip sceptically.

*“You do need a cap after all. I’ll go find something.”*

And disappeared again.

*“Why would I need a cap?”* Grip wondered.

*“So that you’re less recognizeable?”* Marek speculated. *“Won’t hurt to wear one.”*

Lora caught up with them at the lower levels, in hallways that didn’t look even a tiny bit residential, and handed Grip a round shiny black cap.

*“Let me join you for this walk, actually,”* Marek said, examining Lora intently.

The hallways ended with a door, and, behind that door, a large

party ate a watermelon:

“Hi!”

“Hello!”

“Is it him?”

Marek silently nodded at them without slowing down, until he crossed the room and led Grip to another, shorter hallway. Another door, and the passenger flow carried them away.

In the carriage Grip stood overlooking an entire row of phones, and, suddenly, saw Thalia in one of them, and then both of them, giving a speech together. Some lame desert shots, a lizard, some girl skipping a jump rope, something's driving away... His five seconds of fame. Grip turned his back to the phone owner, just in case.

They left shortly after. Grip stared everywhere at once, and the more ads he saw, the less he understood Fist ads. Flashy, bright, memorable, they called for nothing and informed him of nothing. “A good night's sleep”, or even just the green “this side” left him with absolutely nothing actionable.

They're finally outside. The fences here were shorter, protecting from curious stares, not from jumping over them. Smaller houses stood far away from each other. With a housing density so low, where did the people live? Must've been the cars? Absurdly low, they either stood still for long, or crawled so slowly, Grip just couldn't see them as a threat. They were part of the landscape, flowing like a wide river, they were the real New Amsterdam.

Pedestrians had to stay within narrow pavements; so narrow, that they waited in line for another street light: Marek in the front, Grip, then Lora. And Marek said, looking straight in front of him, barely audibly:

*“What’chu up to?”*

*“What, me, nothing,”* her answer was much easier to make out for Grip.

*“Oh, come on. How long do we know each other for, a decade?”*

*“Not continuously.”*

Green light came on and they crossed the road. But Marek stopped shortly after:

*“If you think I’ll just let it slide, think again. What’s that under the coat? Give it to me.”*

Lora handed over some bright magazine. Marek yanked it from her hands, and she dutifully turned around to monitor the surroundings.

The last one who Grip recognized from the cover art was himself. Also, Irakli Kosmovich wasn’t that old, Stalina Filantievna wasn’t that burly, Lisa and Maria didn’t look that much alike and, most of all, Thalia wasn’t such a monster. Skinny as a pole, she lost all fat, all the colour of her face and quite some teeth. Definitely the main villain of this comic book.

*“Look, ma, I’m on TV. Help,”* Grip scratched his nose, befuddled.

*“Could I have a copy?”*

*“Not finding a copy for you, that’d be unthinkable...”* Marek finished skimming through the book.

*"Because, what guests would we be, without a present?"*

*"Where did you find it so quickly? Maksimka?"*

*"Took it from Maksimka..."* Lora confirmed.

*"Laura Remsovna!"* Marek raised his voice. *"Took a comic book from a kid. Now you chase another one for profit."*

*"What profit? I'm penniless."*

*"—Admit it, you wanted him to sign it."*

Grip covered his face with both hands and let out a silent scream.

*"OK, so, we're confiscating the evidence,"* Marek waited for Grip to look at him again and continued in a secretive voice. *"But I can't escort with my hands full, so Grip will be the one to carry it. Not lose it somewhere, not ruin it somehow, and hand it back to me this very evening. Deal?"*

*"Will do!"*

*"And you, we'll have a word with you later."*

Now it was Grip's turn to skim through the comic book:

*"Can we ask this Maksimka guy where to find one?"*

*"Can't buy one here."*

*"But where? Where can I buy one?"*

*"Fed. It's our doing,"* Marek resumed walking. *"Hold on to this one for now, and ask your boss later."*

*"Oh the horror,"* Grip was catching up with him, eyes on the cover art. *"I'll write— I'll write everything, I'll write to partcom, I'll write to plancom, I'll write everywhere..."*

Just a couple of houses later Marek turned right and opened the gate. They went up the porch and Martin Aleksandrovich opened the door almost right away, in a flower-patterned apron and his

hand in flour raised to the side unnaturally:

*"Pertsev! And you— oh, hello,"* he addressed Grip now.

Grip waived him hello with the comic book:

*"Star duo! Reunion! Have you ordered one?"*

*"Thalia!"* he turned to the side to shout. *"You've got guests! Come in, come—"*

*"No-no, we're just escorting Grip, we're—"* Marek shook his head.

*"Oh yeah? Are you abandoning me?"* Grip stared at him. *"Such an invaluable expert? Surrounded by enemies?"*

*"To be torn apart by a defector and a terrorist,"* Martin Aleksandrovich echoed him. *"Tal!"*

*"Tell them the kids are free now",* Grip instructed them and entered the house.

*"Hang it here,"* Martin showed him a flimsy hook and closed the door.

*"Would it hold—"* Grip had doubts about that hook.

*"Fiona, we have a guest!"* Martin left him behind.

Grip's shoulders hurt, walking without the coat was inconvenient. He left the coat standing in the corner and hurried to catch up with the host of another castle. Grip didn't feel ready for indoors running.

Martin Aleksandrovich awaited him in another two-storey hall:

*"Allow me to introduce you to Fiona, my spouse and Thalia's mother."*

He gestured towards a slender white figure gracing a side-table with her presence, sipping from a tiny cup with painfully pretentious elegance. But it wasn't her inhumanely straight back or her

pompous hair that stumped Grip. It was the long white dress that left no room for doubt. Fists or feds, the cultural code was clear. This woman was getting married today.

“Fiona, this is Grip, Tal’s latest partner in crime.”

“Nice to meet you,” the well-drilled phrase rolled off his tongue, and only then Grip’s brain caught up with Martin’s introduction. And blanked out. Hard.

“Nice to meet you too, young man.”

She lowered the cup and gave him a debilitatingly judgmental stare... and kept it lowered, awaiting whatever the etiquette prescribed Grip to do next? Well, tough luck, because at the moment a deer in the headlights would’ve been a more capable conversationalist.

The stalemate was resolved in a few seconds as light steps approached them hastily, providing Grip an excuse to avert his eyes towards— they’ve got a spiral? staircase?? smack in the middle of the room??? —a smaller slender white-dress-toting figure gliding down the stairs with graceful toework only possible on low gravity planets.

“Thalia, dear, you have a guest. Please, greet him like a true lady you are.”

A younger bride, who just reached the floor, ceremonially bowed at Grip:

“Pleased to meet you,” she greeted him melodically.

“I’m not gonna marry your daughter,” Grip said out loud, further cementing his inferiority to the proverbial deer when it comes to

rhetorical prowess. And then, as everyone was processing that, topped it off with a: "Blink twice if you were tortured."

"Excuse me?!" Fiona blushed in shock so utter, her cup has slightly tilted sideways.

But Grip didn't even look her way, as Thalia was almost there, whether it was to rescue or murder him on the spot. It wasn't clear from her facial expression, OK?

"He's joking, mummy," Thalia yanked his hand so hard, she basically sent him flying her way. "Let's go" she cooed tenderly as he focused on not being dragged on the floor, but rather following her at his own will.

Upstairs, Thalia stopped and stared at Grip, fuming. He expected the familiar hissing, but she spoke clearly, quickly and quietly:

*"Never— you hear me— never discuss in front of my mom whom I should marry! Or shouldn't! Understood?"*

"Yeah-yeah, I get it," Grip nodded, disoriented.

*"And what's that thing?"* she turned to the comic book. *"Oh no."*

*"Oh yeah,"* Grip grinned, handing it to her.

*"Oh no,"* she echoed herself, but took the comic book and headed to a room.

Grip has stopped at the door involuntarily to scan the room. A giant bed in the centre of it, as if to sleep across it. Everything is white, save for a tiny black backpack under the window. The room was in perfect order, maybe everything was in that wall-sized wardrobe? One could even call the interior spartan and



ascetic, if it weren't for the statues. Four life-sized statues in one room, one for each corner, that was an overkill.

*"And... This..."*

*"Don't mind it,"* Thalia plopped on the bed with the comic book in her hands. *"Mummy's ideas on style— status—are stuck in the twenty-second century or something."*

Grip was already fighting her for control of the page-turning.

*"They really did you dirty..."*

*"Uh. Whatever. That's an... established image by now."*

The very first page: somebody in black uniform is taking him from the classroom, right from the lizard lesson and Maria Stepanovna, drawn funny—

*"Was it really like this?"*

*"Almost, really,"* Grip shrugged.

—by the end of the second page they're on Arkadia, giving the speech; and on the third one he rises up from a shiny teleport, handing everyone instructions left and right.

*"Hey!"*

*"Wait, you wanted them to draw you unconscious?"* Thalia had the fun of her life. *"Or a rustier teleport?"*

*"No, why am I commanding everyone?"*

*"Eh, big deal, they're getting slightly ahead of themselves,"* she mocked him.

*"And why in the world I'm in school uniform?"*

*"Ow."*

*"At least you're in shorts!"*

The very idea of walking around the base in school uniform made

him sweat, and they haven't yet reached the page where he put on a spacesuit on top of it to walk to the middle of the desert to chat with lizards. The comic book really skimmed on sandwriting. By the time they got to the only panel where he wrote in the sand with his right hand, and kept Thalia away from the discussion with his left hand, Grip gave up on articulating his complaints and just groaned with disappointment.

Whoever drew that comic book, they knew everything that happened at the base, and then decided to draw something else entirely. At the same time, they clearly had no idea of what was happening in the dome — the comic book didn't as much as hint at the existence of the dome. After his triumphant return ("There will be a second meeting!") Grip stopped Thalia from starting anew and eagerly read the publication data.

Author: A. Ya. Sergiyuk. Illustrator: I. Ya. Sergiyuk.

What are they, sisters?

They read the comic book again, studying every corner of it.

*"Lame."*

*"Yeah."*

*"Listen, have you already? Read all your laws?"*

*"Do I look like an idiot?—"*

*"—Erm, how should I—"*

*"Don't test me, immortal. There, the comms were down. Here, I've got lawyers."*

*"Makes sense. And what do they say?"*

*"Same old. If they want to, they'll convict me. That's how it goes here, whoever has—"*

*"A cooler story?" Grip nodded towards the comic book.*

*"More expensive lawyers. And the popular opinion—"*

*"Oh, I saw a crowd who wants to either jail or free me—"*

*"Well, duh! First they need to jail you to free you," she laughed.*

*"Yeah, they haven't exactly made up their minds yet," Grip snickered as well. "On one hand, they're angry that I've closed the planet they—"*

*"Hey! How about me?" Thalia laughed out loud.*

*"And you're free, my dear."*

*"We'll see. In issue four. Who closed the planet. A komsomolets-pioneer? Or a Fist spy?" she prodded the cover, fighting laughter. "Tell them to go on. Keep drawing."*

*"Or what?" Grip snorted. "You're gonna come for them? Through the gap under their door?"*

*"Who do you think I am, Mit'ka?"*

*"Who?"*

*"Infiltra...teur?" Thalia made up a new word. "Another one of your open agents."*

*"I don't know any. I know one infiltrateur, but he stayed on Epsilon Indi 3."*

*"Never mind."*

*"Oh, I won't. I'll be like your crowd. Not a single thought."*

*"They don't know a thing. Nothing has been officially announced yet, but the entire planet thinks we've closed the planet so that we don't put lizards into their heads."*

*"A-a-a, how do they imagine that?"*

*"Badly."*

*"That I can see! My statue with a lizard is turning into..."* Grip flailed his arms.

*"How long since you've been printed?"*

*"Just now. Waited for seventy hours. Glad that they did print me after all."*

*"Nah, they haven't stooped that low yet. Don't worry. You'll come back. No matter what you do. How's your mom?"*

*"I don't know."*

*"Wait," she stopped laughing. "They didn't give you a phone?"*

*"They didn't."*

*"Have you asked for one?"*

*"No. What would I write her anyway? Mom, I've got a tribunal in—"*

*"I've got a tribunal—"*

*"I don't think she's well versed in that. So, what do I need a phone for? You're the only one I know."*

*"Now I also want one—," she tapped the comic book.*

*"My signature?" Grip laughed.*

*"What? A comic book. You're not giving me that one, are you?"*

*"No, that's evidence," Grip stretched out the words, well-pleased.*

*"What are you talking—"*

*"These folks who escorted me here..."*

*"Guards?"*

*"Maybe?"*

*“Short, heavy-footed—”*

*“Yeah-yeah, got one from their son? Maybe. And now it’s one’s evidence against the other.”*

*“What?”*

*“You thought I was joking? About the signature? Some Maksimka guy, he had this—”*

*“Which Maksimka, Tereschenko?”*

*“How would I know? A gal took it from some Maksimka and wanted me to sign it.”*

*“So what?”*

*“I don’t know, some devious plan. But she hid it from the other one, I don’t know who he is, a husband or a brother.”*

*“Ah! You’re federates. Now I get it.”*

*“OK, you get it — you tell it.”*

*“Maksimka Tereschenko is the ambassador’s son—”*

*“And these two are his guards?”*

*“Uh, no, just, guards,” Thalia blinked. “Wanted you to sign it for extra value.”*

*“Why are they short then?”*

*“What do you mean, why?” she giggled. “What if Svobodin arrives? And they’re taller than he. And Tereschenko isn’t exactly tall either.”*

*“Do they offer third hand attachments here?” Grip asked from behind a double facepalm. “I’m running out of them hands. Maybe the comic writers could draw me an extra one. So, they’re shortening people? Just for—”*

*“Ew! Gross! No. I don’t think so. Is there a shortage of short*

people or what?"

"Hmm."

"Nah, you don't need a third hand, I bet they don't know what to do with you and your existing ones," Thalia gloated.

"You'll kill me, eat me and drink the blood," Grip laughed. "Just be careful with the stains, you know, a white dress. Why do you think you're so slender? No pioneer meat—"

"Come on, that's not heroic. Just look at this handsome hero. A handsome hero like this could only die for the noblest of the causes," Thalia tried to suppress laughter.

"My handsome hero dies in act three anyway! Without any cause whatsoever. OK, with a cause, but from stupidity. This way would actually be more heroic. After all, slain by the hand of my mortal enemy—"

"Mortal enemy?" she either got offended or pretended to.

"Mortal enemy, you say? Come here, and I'll show you—"

"Hey— hey! Can true ladies— behave like this?" Grip dodged a slap, laughing. "Is it even legal?"

"Time for dinner, true lady," Martin smiled at them from the hallway.

"Do you feed gentlemen in this house?"

"You bet. You don't even imagine how little do these two peck."

"Have you tried loosening their dresses?"

"No loosening of dresses in this house," he joked before disappearing.

"Can I leave the book here?"

"Oh, sure," Thalia adjusted her dress. "Don't give mummy

*reasons to worry about.”*

At the dinner table, Grip kept a low profile at first, discreetly observing Thalia and Fiona, and then decided to go for it. Why not play this game? Back? Straight. Face? Bland. Attention? To the others. Smile? Stretch it, stretch it, stretch some more. Stares from Thalia? Ignore. Now if he could only recall every single posh word he's ever heard...

Martin Aleksandrovich waltzed out of the kitchen with a large tray and circled the table. Grip was pleased to notice the host do the exact same thing he was doing for the last half a minute: glancing at their straight backs and raised chins, listening to the ringing silence and, in general, trying to discreetly guess what kind of game are they playing today. Except that Martin gave up in the end and just sat down to eat.

“Bon appétit,” Fiona announced, and the system set into motion. Grip stayed as silent as Thalia was, mirrored her grip on the fork and just had fun in general. Martin Aleksandrovich gave them one last confused look and focused on his food.

“Doctor Behring called,” Fiona struck up a conversation. “Said you missed every single check-up this year.”

“Mummy!” Thalia hissed the way Grip was so used to by now, without changing her benign pose a single bit. “Where are your manners? Just send him the scan, you just happen to be in possession of a fresh one.”

“My dear, this isn't just about a scan! I had high hopes for him talking a modicum of sense into you in regard to all this nasti-

ness you consume on your so-called missions—”

“So now this does constitute an acceptable dinner talk topic?”

“How do you find the fricassee?” Martin addressed the guest hastily.

“It’s delicious,” Grip replied with reserved fervour. “I haven’t eaten solid food for days.”

“There’s more of it, but there’s also fish,” Martin smiled.

“And I have zero doubt that it would be just as exquisite,” Grip replied, marvelling internally at his newly discovered word stringing abilities.

The ladies went quiet.

“And how do you find New Amsterdam?”

“I didn’t really have a chance to check it out, unfortunately. It was only today when I arrived, and, to this moment, I’m still unsure about my ability to explore in safety.”

By the end of the phrase, most of his brain was busy celebrating.

“How unfortunate,” Fiona stated. “I hope you’ll be able to alleviate this preposterous inconvenience. There’s so much to see here.”

A small cube of food dropped from Martin Aleksandrovich’s fork, and he immediately picked it back, unfazed.

“I’m afraid,” Grip continued, “That many people took closing of the planet too close to heart.”

“Let’s abstain from discussing work and politics at the table,” she suggested meekly.

The uncontrolled ascent of Grip’s eyebrows brought him dangerously close to stepping out of character. He stared at Thalia;



Thalia stared past him, past everyone, straight ahead. The side of the chair in front of her did not go up in smoke.

“Thalia, darling, would you accompany our guest?”

“I’ll be right back,” Martin Aleksandrovich went to bring the fish.

“With great pleasure,” Thalia chirped. “I hope you have enough time at your disposal for everything you have in mind.”

“Right, time. I’ve got exactly the same amount as you.”

“Indeed,” she grazed him a heavy stare. “Then I suppose, you could proceed with your exploration once you’re done with the in—” she checked herself.

“Tasty, isn’t it?” Grip nodded at her.

“As always,” she muttered and everybody focused on the food for a while.

“So, what’s next for you?” Fiona wondered.

“Fiona, sweetie,” Martin Aleksandrovich couldn’t refrain from commenting on his way back. “Our guest, a pupil, an open agent, has arrived to stand trial. How is he supposed to answer your question, while simultaneously avoiding both politics and work?”

“Ice cream! I definitely plan to get my hands on some—”

“We’ve got some! I’ll bring some,” Martin Aleksandrovich nodded.

“—aside from the... aforementioned topics.”

The ladies withdrew into themselves and temporarily ceased all attempts at striking up a conversation. This time Martin Aleksandrovich brought an entire vase full of colourful balls of ice cream, plus three ice cream bowls. Fiona didn’t get one.

"Do you dislike ice cream?" Grip asked.

"I'm watching my waistline, so, ice cream's for festive occasions only. Something that Martin is fully aware of," she kindly replied.

Grip nodded, deep in his thoughts. He was weighing what does he want more: somehow translating and asking "*would you mind sharing the, without a doubt, one breathtaking story of how did you two manage to meet each other*" or living to see another day.

"So, do you feel completely disoriented?" Martin Aleksandrovich asked right after sitting down.

"Do you want an honest answer? Or—"

"Tell it like it is, I think I'll understand."

"Let's say I'm puzzled."

"We're still discussing the planet, aren't we?" Martin Aleksandrovich made no effort to pretend he's not having fun.

"Sure, definitely, the planet."

"I know that it feels intimidating and totally different at first, but it's very much like Arkadia at heart, just not on the surface."

"Well, then, I'm afraid, I lack a suitable reference point." Grip dusted off and applied one flowery word after another.

"Yeah?" Thalia's dad frowned. "Why did I think you're from Arkadia then?"

"That's simple to explain," Grip bobbed his head. "That's where we had the pleasure to meet for the first time, but that was just... in transit."

"Was it? And you're from..."

"Rosario. Mining, uranium," he added.

“OK, I take it back,” unconstrained with the boundaries of etiquette, Martin Aleksandrovich spread his hands. “I have no idea what you feel right now.”

“I think that’s... a more accurate assessment,” there still were new words left in the corners of his mind.

“People are people, that holds up everywhere. You just need to adjust.”

“So far I haven’t decided yet on whether to adjust or to run away.”

“Anyway, I’m here to help if you—”

“You know a path?”

Grip felt Fiona’s heavy stare with his ear. As he turned his head towards her, the stare slid across his face.

“Could you kindly postpone these until after dinner?” she warbled. “I could leave you to discuss that.”

“Sure, sure” he bowed his head in a nod. “Please accept my apologies, it was no further than several hours ago that I was neck deep in my work, and I haven’t completely adjusted back yet.”

“Apologies accepted,” she softened up.

“Dear Madam, have you ever been told before that your looks are heavy?”

“On multiple occasions, in fact,” she must’ve worn the same creepy smile to each of those occasions.

Thalia’s pale face expressed firm commitment to leave the planet at the earliest opportunity and dedicate the rest of her life to saving every single snail out there, singing or not.

---

*"Listen, friend," back in the bedroom, Grip examined the statues again, and remembered Thalia's Epsilon Indy 3 decorations.*

*"A question. Those two, how did they, um, how did their paths cross? I'm just curious about how a man from Arkadia could cross paths with a person, who has all these other people standing in her bedroom? Stone people?"*

*"So creepy, isn't it?" Thalia wondered quietly with Newt-like ambiguity, referring to either statues, the dinner, her mom or who else knows what.*

*"It's... strange, rather," Grip proceeded with a vague reply.*

*"My dad is a defector,"*

*"Right, that's the bit I know."*

*"My grandfather is the boss of your boss's boss."*

*"The father of your father is a boss of an— a-a-a..."*

*"You still haven't read a thing?"*

*"I told you! No phone! Where would I read that? Nothing in the comic book—"*

*"—really something... Do you know Svobodin at least?"*

*"Thank goodness, not in person."*

*"Watch out, another stunt like this, and it could end—"*

*"Wait, wait, you've got statues watching over you, and I woke up today to Svobodin's photos on the walls. Creepy!"*

*"You have his portraits in every office—"*

*"—but not bedrooms, for—"*

*"—and here it's photos. In a bedroom," Thalia mocked him.*

*"Understandable. That's unusual."*

*"Grandpa—" Grip reminded her.*

*“Defence Minister, Renat Stroich Kirenko, reports directly to Svobodin. Then the head of foreign intelligence, Aksat Dzhonatanovich’s boss—”*

*“—your grandpa—”*

*“—so his son followed in his steps, and he liked it here. And he somehow defected in a way that grandpa could get away with it. You’re sitting high, by the way.”*

*“The funnier the fall. So, is it the part where citizen Voronov meets lady Voronova?”*

*“She’s Strange. As in Strange Logistics.”*

*“Uh, OK, but how did they meet?”*

*“Some dinner party. Dad was fresh out of the Federation, so exotic, so he—”*

*“Exotic? Grip snorted.” The most normal one out of all—*

*“Don’t you fall for that...” Thalia’s hand ran across her face. “So, now you’re thinking how I came to be the way I am?”*

*“No, how do they get along.”*

*“Easy, mummy loves daddy very much. And puts up with all his antics.”*

*“A woman of great patience.”*

*“She?! Not me?!” Thalia managed to say with just the look of her face.*

*“With a mummy like this, you shouldn’t skip any doctor’s visits.”*

*“Very funny,” Thalia pouted. “Yes, my therapist is very well-off.”*

*“Your... therapist?... Do you have a personal gardener as well?”*

*“For that I’d first need a personal garden, wouldn’t I,” she replied, absentmindedly, and reached out for a phone with a frown on*

her face.

*“What happened, is it time to go?”*

*“Yeah, soon. Just wait.”*

A minute later she tilted her phone and smiled.

*“Yesterday. They set your dad free yesterday.”*

*“Good,”* Grip said, reserved. And this time, he went on. *“As long as they don’t lock him back up now. Just like that, you tell a fairy tale to the wrong— Kolobok, that’d be the only one I’ll ever tell my kids, just in case. And you, uh, give me my colleague back, the only place you can don that dress to is down the aisle.”*

*“As if I’d ever leave the house dressed like this...”*

Thalia disappeared into the closet, leaving Grip to wonder whose bedroom is it.

*“Go, go, go. Commence evasive manoeuvres,”* the familiar evil Thalia jumped out the closet, grabbed the comics and sprinted out. *“Mom, dad! We’re out!”*

*“So soon?”* came from downstairs, making Thalia abruptly change course based on the new intelligence.

---

*“... your mom needs the superpower to push and ignite by just staring, Irakli Kosmovich — to procure paper out of thin air, me — a coat like this one—”*

*“And me?”*

*“You need to eat up, eat up and eat up some more.”*

*“How about this one, can you guess what’s sold here?”*

Grip approached the yellow circles, peered into the dark room...

*“It’s just cheese,” he returned to the pavement. “Big deal. A shop for cheese.”*

*“Yeah, right,” Thalia sneered. “As if you don’t have shops with only sausages in stock.”*

They went quiet: the street ahead was the blocked one with the embassy. A bright yellow figure watched them, half-leaning, half-sitting on the car with “POLICE” written all over it. Grip adjusted his coat, pulled his hat lower. Thalia just sped up. The crowd of protestors against who-knows-what got thinner. While they were distracted with Marek leaving the building, the kids went along the street just fine. But then they got recognized. One person started filming them without a word, a second one, a third one... The crowd stirred, parted to take better videos; some approached them, but didn’t want to meddle with the kids.

*“Free the kids!” Grip barked.*

One five-year old ran towards them, blocking Grip’s path, grabbed his sleeve and just stared, mouth agape. Grip grabbed his hand in return and briefly shook hands with him as he skirted around the boy, leaving him to stare at his hand.

*“Over here!”*

Marek opened the gate and everybody set off to run somewhere, but it was too late. Grip and Thalia broke stride and dashed for safety, Marek showed a couple of people away unceremoniously and closed the gate, then they ran up the steps and hid behind the door.

*“Give it to me!”*

Once inside, Grip was stared up by some chubby ill-tempered eight-year old, his hand stretched out demandingly. Grip folded the comic book to lightly bonk him at his head. The boy froze for a split second before snatching the book and running away.

*"What was that?"* Marek reproached Grip.

*"Who was that, what did he want?"*

*"Maksimka, the ambassador's son,"* Thalia replied enthusiastically.

*"Oops,"* Grip pursed his lips.

*"A son or not, that wasn't nice of you,"* Marek concluded. *"Apologies are due, so, next time you meet you'd rather—"*

*"Yeah, that came out awkward,"* Grip agreed, looking where to place Maksimka's coat, while Thalia has marched straight to the hall.

*"Why did you bring her here?"*

*"Where else would—"*

*"What do you think you're doing here?"* she lashed out on them right away.

*"Oh!"*

*"We were expecting you,"*

Irakli Kosmovich turned his phone towards the group. "Voronov works for communists" was the headline.

*"Yeah, hello to you as well,"* Aksat Dzhonatanovich greeted her.

*"Which Voronov?"* Grip grinned. *"Could they be more specific—"*

*"Did you even plan to tell him about his dad?"*

*"We were planning to. Right after the inquest."*

*"Then why don't you give him a phone? Got something else to*



hide?”

“Oh, that’s not us, that’s your stupid laws,” Aksat Dzhonatanovich parried with great relief.

“What laws?”

“The ones that don’t let kids have phones.”

“Oh really? Explain this then!” Thalia waved her phone in his face.

“And this one’s your mom’s, dad’s or even a company one,” he replied.

But the topic has changed since: Thalia noticed Stalina Filantieva.

“And what’s that?” she shrieked. “What did she do to you?”

“Was it us who didn’t approve her permit up until we’ve printed her?”

“—defender bestowed upon me,” Stalina Filantieva groaned.

“Shoo. Find yourself some snails and defend them instead.”

“What snails?”

“From the wind,” Aksat Dzhonatanovich response was doubly out of place.

“If you’re here, where’s Dmytro Ivanovich? Grip changed the subject.

“Showers. New Amsterdam welcomed him with an extra portion of tomato sauce.”

“Brr. And we had a comic drawn about us!”

“—oh yeah—”

“Though she, basically, got reduced to pigtails—”

---

*"And where to?"* Stalina shifted to sitting.

*"They don't tell,"* Irakli Kosmovich looked up from the book.

*"They don't want the press to know,"* Aksat Dzhonatanovich nodded.

*"... where they shouldn't have run to?"* Grip inserted.

*"And how's that an open hearing?"* Stalina frowned.

*"They could publish a recording in the end, and it'd still count,"* Irakli Kosmovich shrugged.

*"Anyway, wherever it is, can't be far from here."*

Thalia put down the crossword to look at the phone. Derevyashko glanced at his watch.

*"Yeah, yeah, get ready,"* Marek remarked as he strode past the door. *"Soon."*

---

Stalina Filantievna's movements were frightening, as if she was constantly being shocked. Two long, low limousines drove up to the entrance. They stood diagonally across the street, with tens of yellow policemen scurrying around them.

*"How are we gonna drive through that, chief?"* Derevyashko shouted.

*"Over here,"* Marek led them between the cars. *"Follow me."*

He gave those entrusted to him another glance and rushed to open the gate across the street. The journalists that stepped aside to calculate where to go next, stormed the cars again.

The plaque on the building across said "Institute of hybrid law enforcement". The doors opened into a large hallway, where a

white-haired old man greeted them warmly. But Grip missed his speech entirely, rushing towards a tall figure further away.

“Colleague!”

“Dan!”

Up close, the figure indeed turned out to be Dan, as seen from below. Moreover, in the flesh, he turned out not just much darker, but also, like, three heads taller than Grip imagined him to be.

“So we do meet again after all!” Dan bent down to shake Grip’s hand.

“Nice to see! The pixels, alive! Is Lee also here, maybe?”

“No,” Dan shook his head. “At least they had the decency to not drag him into this.”

“Good.”

“Well, Lee did nothing wrong!”

“Yeah, that’s true.”

“Hello-hello,” Lisa waived at Grip.

“No wandering away, follow me,” the old man ordered them around. “Or upstairs and the first room on the left, for those who just can’t wait.”

The giant room was all topsy-turvy. Steep rows of seats towered around, dozens of them, all empty; instead they took seats at the table below according to the nameplates. The table itself would make sense, were it curved the other way. Or if the chairs were on the other side of it, though then they’ll be facing the wall instead of the missing audience. Because of that stupid curve, Grip saw almost no one from his central seat, but Maria to the left and Stalina to the right. Besides the nameplate, there were

glasses of water, some notepads and pens...

The last two to enter the room were the two “twin teen toons”, a grotesque couple Grip spotted along the way. Same eye shape, same mannerism—it was easier to list what differed: their hair, a bit, their garments, a lot. The business suit of the blue one with a cyan fist on the lapel earned just a passing glance from Grip. Now, the suit of the red one, on the other hand, once he deciphered the author’s intent— Oh, that’d be hilarious to bring mom such coveralls, just to see the look on her face. And were she to wear it to work, the entire seventeenth search group would tear their bellies from laughing. That wasn’t exactly conducive to taking the inquest seriously.

Just as the blue one began to talk in English, loud knocking interrupted her. Grip leaned back on the chair and twisted himself to see it was just Derevyashko who dropped the earphones.

*“I’m sorry, excuse me...”*

Grip jumped at the pile of stuff in front of him to fish out an earphone for himself. It featured a translation.

*“... the presence of which in Lisa Frei and Maria Stinner’s actions, might suggest the following: instigating a suicide pact, assisting suicide, and criminal sabotage.”*

*“We’re holding an inquest,” the red one commenced. “into the consequences of the actions of Grip Avdotievich Stavropolskiy, Stalina Filantievna Ivanova and Irakli Kosmovich Shpreigl, suspected of organizing mass suicide, driving to suicide, a failure to fulfil the work duties to dire, resulting in severe conse-*

*quences for life and health, and exceeding official authority.”*

*“Feel free to speak in either language. As always, everything you say can be used against you.”*

*“Grip Avdotievich Stavropolskiy, may I address you with a singular you?”*

*“As you wish.”*

*“Please summarize the most important events of your stay on Epsilon Indi 3 in general.”*

*“Oh... I was sent there to establish diplomatic contact with... let’s call them lizards. They showed interest in our... nature, animals. They were provided samples to study. I think we were successful in convincing them we’re safe to them, after which one of their representatives, I’ll call him Newt... expressed the desire to... examine our housing, a possibility we’ve granted to him, after which a rather unfortunate incident– I think I can speak freely of it, without hurting anybody’s feelings, as it has happened directly to me– and... as he tried to study me closer, it so happened that I’ve perished. Yeah...”*

*“I’m afraid we already need a lot of clarifications at this point.”*

*“Well, you asked for a summary.”*



## (Not) disciplined

If the red one stuck to the facts meticulously, the questions he got from the blue one got sillier and sillier:

“Grip Stavropolskiy. If Newt were a human, how would you describe his personality?”

*“I’m not doing this,”* Grip frowned. *“And I would advise everyone else against that. Newt is no human. None of that stuff of ours is applicable to him.”*

“In all fairness, you’re actually rather consistent with this position of yours,” the blue one nodded. “But I’d still like to quote a few characterizations you’ve used— let me quote—”

*“No need to,”* Grip interrupted her anxiously. *“If I’ve used any, I was wrong. Newt is no human.”*

“OK, but you are. When you learned who killed you, did you feel resentment? Betrayal?”

*“No. I don’t resent him, and he did not betray me. I understand—he just wanted to meet the parasite inside my head, don’t you*

*get it? He didn't know any different, that mind can be the animal itself."*

"What did you feel when you've realized he was the one who killed you?"

*"Why does it matter? Dismay. Relief. Enough?"*

"Relief?"

*"I knew for sure: he didn't mean to."*

"By the way, when exactly did you realize it was him?"

*"Precisely? When I saw the tracks... on the lizard cage."*

"And when did you start suspecting him?"

*"Almost right away. As soon as I understood we brought him in. Like, who else? He was the only thing that changed."*

"Could your relationship at the time be characterized as one based on mutual respect?"

*"I've said it before, I'll say it again: my attitude to Newt didn't change after the incident. And respect is a human emotion—"*

"Friendship?"

*"—stop labelling lizards with them."*

"Trust?"

*"... that's a stretch. But, probably, yes,"* Grip agreed unexpectedly.

"And why aren't you arguing with that one?"

*"He trusted us enough to come over for a sleepover. We've been building up language, we didn't understand each other, and... I can't say he fully trusted us, but he trusted us in some things. I don't know how to apply these concepts to our relationships... I... time and time again I saw Newt risk his safety to understand us better. I think that could be called trust?"*



"You know best. And what about the dynamics, did he trust you more each passing day?"

*"I'd like to believe that. That was my task. I did my best."*

"Have you started to trust him more?"

*"It's complicated. I understood that I don't understand a thing,"*

Grip took a long pause. *"I understood him a bit more. I don't know, how does the 'trust' label apply to all of that."*

"If only I understood which words do you deem acceptable. Could you try to describe your relationships again, maybe that'd help? Who were you, to each other?"

*"... We were like a scoutmaster to each other, but in turns, constantly changing roles. And never fully understanding each other. I think, it might always be like this, with all the lizards. We're too different from them."*

"OK, and the other lizards?"

*"We didn't talk much with the other lizards. We mostly discussed Newt."*

"And is it OK to compare Newt with the other lizards?"

*"Sure, I can try. Newt is more curious. Smaller in size. Braver. He trusted us more, again."*

"And what was the other lizards' attitude to that?"

*"I don't know, disapproval?... You're digging into lizard emotions again. I can't even say that. Ask some scientists whether lizards have emotions."*

"Helga Voronov. Have you suspected so-called Newt of involvement in Grip's murder?"

"Yes, I have."

"Since when exactly?"

"Right away."

"And when did you become sure of that?"

"Same time as Grip."

"Have you shared your suspicions with Grip?"

"No, I haven't."

The blue one stepped back, to the lowest row of seats, and quickly checked her phone.

"*Helga Voronov*," the red one strode along the table to immediately substitute her. "*Why have you kept your suspicions a secret from your partner?*"

"Murder is one serious accusation," Thalia spoke painstakingly slowly. "And Newt is their envoy. I'd never toss around baseless allegations like that."

Ah, no, turns out silly questions were contagious.

"*Grip Stavropolskiy. Describe your relationships with Helga Voronov.*"

"... *are you interested in anything specific?*"

"Well, *are you fine with labelling at least this relationship as friendship?*" the red one was openly amused.

"Yeah, maybe, this one's fine," Grip smiled back.

"*Awesome. When you talked to the lizards, would it be fair to say she steered the conversation? Set the subject? Led the talks?*"

"*I'd like to think we were on equal footing,*" Grip shook his head.

"*We've had our ups and downs and arguments, I'm kinda better with writing, she — with diplomacy... Maybe I underestimate*

*her manipulation skills, but I think it was equal, me and her. And she definitely wasn't in charge. I don't even know her job title, but it wasn't my superior."*

*"Dmytro Derevyashko," the red one picked a new victim. "As Grip's immediate superior, please clarify the following: does bringing an alien to the base constitute a violation of Grip's work duties?"*

*"No, as far as my judgement goes, it does not," he droned back. Grip raised his hand.*

*"That's not how we roll here," the blue one shook his head at him. Grip lowered his hand back.*

*"Stalina Ivanova. You had RPB trigger twice in a row before Grip's death, but each time you just recalibrated. Why?"*

*"As you're perfectly aware from the vitals logs you have at your disposal, I expected a new animal to appear at the base."*

*"Yes, but didn't you find it odd that the next day—"*

*"Now, this kind of questions, I'm not answering those," she replied, unfazed. "Especially through the lens of my speculations."*

*"Stalina Ivanova," the red one repeated coldly. "Has RPB triggered once again in a day or so?"*

*"I'm sorry, I don't have to answer your questions."*

*"Daniel Washington," the red one kept staring at Stalina. "Has Stalina Ivanova ever taken any measures to keep the vital parameters monitoring secret from either the crew or the centre?"*

"I have absolutely no idea what kind of measures could that possibly be. Lee and me aside, she immediately reported both the event and her suspicions to Dmytro as well, and that's about everyone above suspicion."

*"And was it him who demanded you turn off the comms?"*

"With the looming interspecies conflict on the horizon, yeah, that was a smart move."

*"I'd like to remind all of you this was the first, temporary communications outage,"* the red one stepped aside from Stalina. *"Daniel Washington. What exact measures are there behind the so-called 'closing the planet' I keep hearing about?"*

"I'm glad you asked," Dan sat upright as she approached him.

"It ain't what springs to mind, it's much simpler, really. Almost all transmissions, batched and unbatched, all the queues, they normally need the communications officer's approval anyway. If one approves nothing, and shuts a few automated systems down, that's already it."

*"It' meaning radio silence?"*

"That's not an appropriate term, radio's only used within the planet anyway. But yes, all this pompous 'closing planets' stuff is just glorified keeping it mum. And that gives you a one-way membrane to contain the sensitive information."

*"Specifically?"*

"Lizard scans. That-thing-inside-the-lizard scans."

*"Why would that need a one-way radio silence, if you could just agree to not transmit it?"*

"... That wasn't my decision to begin with," Dan began, cautiously.

"I got a feeling they had a bit of a distrust down there when it comes to publicizing... the internal details... of the real inhabitants."

The blue one rushed towards the table, but the red one was quicker:

*"Maria Stinner. Couldn't you clarify the nature of such distrust—"*  
Grip rolled up his eyes.

*"—and the way the scans could take to leave the planet without your active involvement."*

"After I would've figured out the way to prepare them for scanning," Maria picked words with great care, "anyone with access to the teleports could send them to the rest of the humanity."

*"We've just established that this requires coordination with the communications officer. Your communications officer. Why take such measures then?"*

"... I'm not the best person to answer that... At the very least, I was under the impression, that the data could be masqueraded as something else entirely and exfiltrated that way... by misleading the communication officer."

*"Daniel Washington—"*

*"Folks, it's way simpler than that. I never see what exactly goes to Federation anyway."*

*"Maria Stinner. You left the question about the nature of the emerged distrust unanswered."*

"I..." Maria began very carefully. "I— even though I never stated that —I could've left an impression with Grip that... introducing

Epsilon Indi 3 inhabitants to people could strip them of free will."

"Can it?"

"I can't know for sure. We had just one case, I could not adequately observe that, and I lack sufficient evidence for claiming Grip lost his free will anyway."

"Really? Grip Stavropolskiy," the blue one displaced the red one.

"Has Maria left you with such an impression."

"*She's contributed,*" Grip snorted, *"to creating one"*.

"Who else has contributed to that?"

"*Actually, the lizard? One I've talked with? One that moved its tail, wrote sentient thoughts with it and had no free will?*" Grip proudly replied.

The displaced red one has awkwardly raised her fist to conceal her chuckle. The blue one has not expected such a reply.

"So, you're saying," the red one added fuel to the fire, *"That Maria and the lizards left you under an impression, that this technology is unsafe to trust the Fist with?"*

"No," Grip smiled. *"Maria and lizards... left me an impression... that this technology is unsafe to entrust to people. Because people could use it to harm other people."*

"So, you don't trust Federation?" the blue one asked casually.

"I don't trust people," Grip replied. "In general. If we've got prisons, that means people can harm each other. And we have militia. And Fists have police, so they also have people that can harm each other. Also, on the meat level, for the lizards, we

and fists are all the same.”

“You’re right. Police protects people from exactly that: crimes committed by other individuals. Not from wars though. And not from new biological weapons. To protect yourself from a state, one needs another state. Don’t you trust your own state, Grip?”

*“I don’t know what it is,”* Grip smiled. *“We haven’t studied that at school yet. Tell me what a state is, without people, and I’ll try to answer whether I trust that or not.”*

“That’s not how things are done here,” the blue one recovered from his rebuke. “But, out of respect for your tender age, I’ll try to explain that one. A person could fly into a temper, for example, do something wrong and regret that later. A state is such a balanced system that it’s much more stable than a human, so one could trust it more than the individuals comprising it.”

*“But the system is still made of people,”* Grip shrugged. *“You— As you say, but I can’t answer your question.”*

*“Grip Stavropolskiy,”* the red one changed the subject. *“Do I understand correctly, that you’ve decided lizards could be weaponized?”*

*“Yes.”*

*“Why?”*

*“I died from one, meaning they sure could.”*

*“I’m sorry, but doesn’t humanity wield much more efficient poisons, bombs, bullets—”*

*“And knows what to do with all of that. But not with lizards, so, no one would be worse if we first thought it through in depth.”*

*“Dmytro Derevyashko,”* the red one began again. *“As Grip’s*

*immediate superior, please comment on the following: would Grip's refusal to hand over the technology to the Federation constitute a violation of Grip's work duties?"*

Dmytro Ivanovich cleared his throat:

*"Look, I'm going to save you some time and quote both the instructions issued to him. First, the primary one: establish and maintain diplomatic relationships between humans and lizards, which I've later put together as "befriend them", for brevity's sake. Second, the secondary one, went like this: when you convince lizards to hop over, try to make sure they pick Federation. It didn't come to that one."*

*"And do you think closing the planet violates these instructions?"*  
*"At the very least, that's up for interpretation,"* he pretended to lapse into deep thinking. *"He established the relationships alright, has a track record of securing more meetings. As I understand it, earned their trust and is saving them from a demographic catastrophe, possibly, this very moment. As to the limited connectivity with the planet, I thought that won't last forever."*

*"Would you also deny this exceeds his authority?"*

*"Now, that's one curious question I'd love to come back to, were the investigation to establish it was Grip who did that,"* his demonstratively chill intonation was ruined by the mockery creeping in. *"And for now I'd just rather highlight that when Daniel told us the story of him, Stalina and my copy shutting the communications down, that somehow hasn't elicited a single question about the authority of either of them."*



“Grip Stavropolskiy,” the blue one took the initiative. “Back then, on Epsilon Indi 3, were you aware that instigating a suicide pact, assisting suicide or driving one to suicide are considered felonies, according to both Federation and Fist laws?”

“No,” Grip raised his palm, and removed the earphone with the other hand. “Could you, please, repeat the last sentence, word-by-word?”

“Back then, on Epsilon Indi 3, were you aware that instigating a suicide pact, assisting suicide and driving one to suicide are felonies, according to both Federation and Fist laws?” she repeated slower.

“No,” Grip placed the earphone back in. “*Definitely not.*”

“Now that you are, can you guess why?”

*“I guess, because it’s assumed we... haven’t asked the opinion of those who stayed? Why, does it matter if it’s a copy and that’s it, the copy, who made the decision?”*

“None whatsoever. The legislation is rather conservative in this respect.” the blue one shook her head. “And what do you think about it?”

*“That’s a choice. I would agree,”* Grip treaded carefully. *“Now, whether that could be done to others, that’s something to ask the others about.”*

For the first time in the entire session, the twins looked at each other, and, seemingly, ignored everything Grip said. For a few more seconds they’ve contemplated their next move.

“Grip Stavropolskiy,” the blue one continued. “Do you claim that

humanity poses a threat to the lizards' way of life?"

"Yes," Grip agreed readily.

"How so?"

*"As we've investigated the incident, we've learned, that—"*

Grip stuttered. Something on the table glared into his eye— a tiny grey spider. Right in front of him, on a black tablet, behind the pencil. The spider didn't like the attention and commenced a retreat.

"What's that?!" Grip stretched out his arm.

With a loud rumble, Stalina lunged forward to catch it – and missed. Maria jumped up and stood behind the chair. Grip stretched across the table for the last ditch attempt to catch the spider. And also missed.

"I'm sorry," Grip slid back with both of his hands raised.

"I saw something," Maria sat back.

"What exactly did you consider to be a threat to the lizards' way of life?" the blue one continued calmly.

*"We've learned there's just eleven of them,"* Grip proceeded.

*"When it's just eleven of you, and we're sixty billion, that's a huge difference."*

"And you want to make more of them?"

*"Exactly. We stayed back to make more of them, and I really think that if we help them with that, they will all begin to trust us, and it'll be safer for them, and they'll want to continue this contact, because we've helped them."*

"But why would that require closing the planet for decades?"

*"I don't know how much would it take. First we need to learn a*

*safe way to do it, then we need to actually do it..."*

"But shouldn't you do the opposite: in order to do it safely, invite as many experts as possible?"

*"Maria is a qualified specialist. Too many cooks spoil the broth—"* Maria couldn't sit straight and wanted to say something, but nobody asked her.

*"—and it'll all take a lot of time, and they're afraid of our mechanisms— they lead very simple lives, and they're bothered by complex things —and they'll have to get used to the new people, so it's best if it's me, Thalia and Maria, starting with Newt, and then we'll see."*

"We'll see," the red one shook her head and extended her arm, pointing at Dan. *"What are your views on the incident, closing the planet, allegations and the other topics we've covered? Daniel Washington."*

"Me?" Dan wondered. *"What about me, there ain't a single decision I've made, and, as far as my views go, I'd rather keep'em to myself."*

The red one wasn't satisfied with that, but Dan stayed silent.

*"Irakli Shpreigl",* she moved her hand at last.

*"Not a single question before, and now that,"* he grunted. *"I won't keep mine to myself. I've been around, saw it all, and now I trust neither people nor governments. I find the very idea of 'introducing' sentient into sentient outright heinous. As far as I'm concerned, they did the right thing."*

*"Lisa Frei."*

"I also don't have a... well-formed opinion. Fine by me."

*“Maria Stinner.”*

“I don’t think we were in position to make such decisions... And the conclusions that... some of us drew were hasty, rushed and deeply emotional. I’m against the closing.”

Grip was sitting sideways, stared at her sceptically, and now he had to turn straight quickly.

*“Grip Stavropolskiy.”*

*“I consider the incident to be a mutual misunderstanding, closing the planet to be... the best option out of all the available ones,”*

Grip was getting anxious. *“I agree with Maria that we’re not the ideal people to decide. We were, more like, scientists. But I don’t consider myself guilty.”*

*“Stalina Ivanova.”*

*“I decry your attempts to incriminate organizing or instigating suicide as absurd. Exceeding authority: not my decision to make. The incident, I consider it to be exactly that: an incident. And I’ve always disapproved closing the planet.”*

*“Could you clarify?”*

*“Call that intuition,” she smirked.*

*“Dmytro Derevyashko.”*

*“I consider the actions of my subordinate justified, adjusted for his age. For the life of me, I don’t see which instructions he has violated; and exceeding authority, I’ve already made my point on that. Whatever charges you might press, I’d find that excessive.”*

*“Helga Voronov.”*

*“I’ll refrain from commenting.”*

The blue one couldn’t take it any more and stepped up again:

“Grip Stavropolskiy. I just can’t get my head around one thing. It poses little importance for the charges, if we were to press any, but it’s paramount for the public opinion, so I can even close the session for this answer. Session’s over.”

Behind her, the red one stared at the back of her head, foreshadowing a tough conversation between the two of them.

“Whom were you saving, Grip? Us or them?”

At this point both Stalina and Maria shook their head vigorously, suggesting Grip to refrain from answering, but he didn’t see them. Not only because of the stupid table — he just so happened to lean forward to place the earphone back.

“Us from them, and them from us.”

“Oh well, that’s what I thought. Thank you all—”

Without the earphone, the rest of her phrase drowned in the rumble from all the massive chairs.

*“What was that? The thing that ran away?”* Stalina leaned towards Grip.

*“I don’t know, some badge-spider. I thought it was part of the pen, but it runs.”*

*“How did you notice it?”*

*“It lit up, right into my eye! We should ask Thalia.”*

Grip looked around. They were let out through another door, and Thalia was way ahead. Dan put his phone back, locked eyes with him and stated in a quiet voice:

“I think I know why they let us go so quickly. Let’s go—”

Grip nodded and followed Stalina, but got caught and dragged

away by Thalia right behind the door:

*“Grip, Lora. Lora is stupid!”* Thalia was boiling up.

“Hey!” Lora, a tall high schooler, took offence to that. “That word I do know.”

“—and I’m ‘valenok’—”

“Nice to me—”

“Lora thinks we should’ve been housed them in our heads!”

“She what?” Grip squinted.

“—that’s not exactly what I—”

“—tell her!”

“Why?” Grip asked directly.

“First of all, you haven’t even tried to—”

“What do you mean ‘we haven’t tried’, we have. Have you read the whole fairy tale? It didn’t work great.”

“Yeah-yeah, you died. But you had a cure, and you didn’t even try!”

“Try what, putting them into our heads?”

“What if this is the key to understanding them? The right way for humans and lizards to coexist? As a whole? What if nobody should’ve learned any languages?”

Thalia threw her hands at Lora in desperation, as in, don’t you see, she’s clearly off the rails!

“Why? What for?” Grip insisted. “Do you want to always have another sentient being with you?”

“Well, maybe I do. And now, thanks to someone, I won’t even—”

“Marry.”

“What?”

“Find some guy and marry him.”

Thalia propped herself against Grip’s shoulder to laugh out loud.

“This is totally different,” Lora answered amicably. “A guy is a separate creature—”

“And so are they!”

“Yes!” Thalia echoed him.

“—and here we’d be together inside one head—”

“Would you lock him up there? Why do you even think there will be a ‘you’ in there?”

“Yeah!— Wait, what?” Thalia turned her head at Grip.

“Why do we think lizards survive that?”

“What do you mean? They don’t survive?” Thalia blinked at him.

“Perhaps they don’t survive,” Lora shrugged. “Perhaps they do. Who knows? Right, nobody does. What you should’ve done is to see for yourself!”

“Maybe we will, we just won’t—” Grip stated, distracted by the commotion in the middle of the hallway. “Wait a minute.”

Dan towered the crowd, the rest orbited him. Stalina Filantievna was already escaping his gravitational pull.

“—what does that mean?—”

“—*from up there*—”

“—what are they saving up for—”

“—twenty-two—”

“*Super-spy! Fetch the information!*” Grip stroke a pose, pointing at Dan.

Thalia reached the crowd in three large hops, sliced through

with another one and hung onto Dan's hand, to great dismay of everyone around. A copy was sent to everyone and the commotion fragmented into smaller clusters. Grip joined Thalia, next to Derevyashko.

+22, they all argue. T. Can't fix reproduction alone without travel. Can read and alter memory. M. Right decision. We aren't ready. 20 years. G. Hi. N1.

*"What, what does it all—" Grip wondered.*

*"Plus twenty-two means we did it! Yee-haw!"*

*"And 'T' means you!"*

*"Then 'M' is Maria! 'G' is—"*

*"And 'N one' means Newt! The original one."*

*"O-o-oh."*

*"What does it mean 'can't fix reproduction'? What 'travel'?"*

*"We need to ask Maria. About memory as well,"* Thalia scanned the hallway. *"Oh, Irakli Kosmovich, they don't have a 'hi', do they?"*

*"They sure don't,"* the linguist confirmed. *"Somebody taught them ours. Who could it be?"*

*"Grip, don't you find something odd?"* Dmytro Ivanovich asked.

*"'Can't fix'? 'Alone without travel'?"*

*"No. Do you find something missing?"*

*"... What? Everything here is excessive."*

*"I would've said 'goodbye'."*

*"I wouldn't. I wouldn't write anything."*

*"Wait,"* Irakli Kosmovich laughed. *"I wouldn't write 'goodbye'."*



*either.”*

“Why?” Derevyashko wondered.

*“Good luck charging—”*

*“—us with suicide, right!”* Grip finished the sentence. *“Yeah!”*

*‘Right!’* Irakli Kosmovich gleefully confirmed.

*“Why then?”* Grip turned to Dmytro Ivanovich.

*“To be sure they’re gone.”*

*“Who cares? Would he come back? And we’ll get mixed up?”*

*“No,”* Derevyashko let out a faint smile. *“No way.”*

*“Would claim my life? Inheritance?”*

*“No, that’s not—”*

*“That’s it, then.”*

Grip waved to Martin Aleksandrovich, watching this from far away with Stalina and Lisa. Who is this man? Grip never saw him before. Thalia was next to Maria:

*“—still out there? What do you think?”* Maria asked.

*“I don’t think so.”*

*“I do. And you, Grip?”*

*“I think it does not matter.”*

*“Hey, not cool!”* Thalia protested. *“You were supposed to be the third—”*

*“I, uh, wanted to ask. About the press. What was that thing that ran away from us? About this small, like a spider, grey, we saw it, and it ran—”*

*“Well, you answered it yourself,”* Thalia looked at him, quizzed.

*“They wanted an exclusive video. Was that the ruckus—”*

*“Yeah. Didn’t catch it. They’ll have funny video now...”*

“Nah, that’s not what they’re after, they want you speaking. Especially something they could twist. Whatever. If you see yourself talking, from below your chin, that’s where it came from.”

Thalia finished the sentence, staring intensely at a white-haired old man who greeted them downstairs. As he approached them, he pulled his hands out of the pockets. He then bumped Thalia and Grip’s shoulders with his fists and opened his palms, revealing two badges, each depicting a curly-haired bearded head.

“Glad to meet you two! I’m honoured to appoint you honorary members of the Newest Ethics Academy.”

“Thank you,” Thalia squeaked, grabbed the badge and ran away.

“New Aesthetics?” Grip asked.

“*Newest Ethics*,” the old man switched to passable Russian.

Grip raised the weightless, printed badge, letting his imagination try it on to the statues he saw earlier today. It didn’t really fit in stylistically.

“*Would like to know what it is?*”

“Yeah,” Grip nodded.

“*Enroll and you could learn it all. Perhaps there still will be problems left for you.*”

“*Problems?*”

“*Those you brought. About lizards. Memory. Mind control. Do you say this: ‘if this somehow true could be, mushrooms would’ve grown on ye?’*”

“Yeah, we do,” Grip liked his weird pronunciation.

“*So for centuries, for centuries we’re debating various hypotheti-*

*cals, thought we know. And now you come with those lizards of yours: see, here they are, mushrooms. Mind control. Memory. Lizards'. Ours. What did you have, philosophers? Remind us? And we just...?"*

*"We didn't grow them, just discovered them," Grip nodded gleefully. "But I understand what you're saying."*

*"Yeah. So we'll think again now, probably, anew."*

*"And this 'honorary member' thing, it's...?"*

*"You have the right to attend our meetings... But, I'm afraid, you live so far away, this will be mostly a formality."*

*"Pity."*

*"Pity. But big thank you! And this is for you, to remember..."*

He made a few steps away, issued a prolonged glance to Thalia, who was all but shrieking at Lora:

*"—your idea, it's even neat! It's you whom I hate! How could you—"*

*"Dear guests!"* he interrupted their one-sided scene. *"I'm afraid we can't let you go just yet, but we could offer refreshments in the meantime. Follow me down—"*

*"Listen, now when we'll be tried and—"* Grip addressed Thalia.

*"They pretty much let you walk away with that,"* she cut him short, staring at Lora, who was being distracted by Lisa.

*"Are you sure? One hundred percent?"*

*"Not a hundred, but stop worrying about it, worry about the media."*

---

This micro-canteen's food stand was almost non-existent and barren. Instead, pizza boxes were stacked on one of the tables. Derevyashko and Martin Aleksandrovich grabbed one each without breaking their stride and headed for the furthest table. An impromptu council of Thalia, Lora and the white-haired man was debating something so intensely, Grip couldn't follow it any more after all he's been through today. Maria and Lisa kept tabs on them, and Dan kept asking Grip questions:

"How was it like, talking with lizards?"

"Totally unlike people. You can't translate them. We have no words for them, they – for us."

"They don't have many, but they do have some, don't they? 'Go', 'stop', 'look', 'yes', 'no' –"

"No, no 'stop', and, most importantly, no 'good' and 'bad'. Like, they have it, but it's something different. We thought about it so much..."

"So, did you understand it?"

"We did. That they have no such words. And when they do, you can always understand in many ways."

"And emotions—"

"I'm not joking. I don't know. If Newt is afraid or... what's the word when you're deciding to do or not do..."

"Hesitation?"

"Maybe."

"So, do they have words for emotions? If they have a word for hesitation, they probably feel it."

"No. They have 'rejoice', but it's..." Grip waved his hands. "Action,

word for action, not emotion.”

“Are you really not upset with Newt?”

“Oh come on!” Grip shook his hands in the air. “How many times do I have to repeat? Why does nobody listen to me?”

“I don’t know!” Dan bent even lower. “I really thought you’re just being noble, forgiving him and everything. How can you not be upset?”

“Like this. Why should I be upset? I wasn’t even there, maybe that’s why? When I was little, my mom made those,” Grip played out a little pantomime.

“Bubbles?” Dan mustered a guess.

“Yeah, and I smashed all of them. Am I now a terrible bubble killer? No, I was just curious. And he was just curious.”

“What, he didn’t want to take control over our leader and conquer the world?” Dan mocked disappointment.

“He’d better not fall and smash himself. I’ll be back.”

Grip was absent for just a little, and Thalia and Lora already had a peace-making ceremony. Even though they didn’t really agree at all. Under the old man’s influence, Lora admitted, that they were right to close the planet, but purely by accident, as they haven’t learned about altering memory yet. Meaning, she didn’t abandon her head cohabitation ideas.

Now Thalia was catching up with some shared news with Lora, and Lisa seemed to set a goal to open each and every pizza box. Grip decided to go to the Russian-speaking corner, but first to grab a piece of pizza.

“You should try this one, and this one as well. If it’s such a breakthrough and stuff, why isn’t every single headline about writing memory?” Lisa asked Maria.

“Because the sane ones understand it’s not about people, and all the nutjobs already think we can decode and implant thoughts?”

Maria waived her slice of pizza.

“Are you sure we don’t?”

Maria stared at Lisa in silence until she stopped her rummage and looked back.

“What in the world you’re inhabiting led you to believe we already can?”

“I wouldn’t go to school then!—” Grip remarked.

“Precisely.”

“—just learned everything on my way home, boom! No schools!”

“No courts,” Maria nodded.

“No jails?” Grip suggested.

“No reports.”

“Oh yeah,” Lisa responded.

“Is it really a bad thing?”

“A wonderful one. No complaints either,” Dan replied. “Why are you so bitter, Mary? Looks like they let you go. Is something—”

“Of course I’m furious,” she pursed her lips.

“With whom?”

“With myself!”

“Because of what she wrote?”

“What she didn’t. The thoughts bit could come in handy— but not a word on reproduction. What an asshole.”

“Why do you call yourself this,” Grip was saddened. “You should love yourself. She loves you too, so she cares about you—”

Maria wasn’t buying this.

“—so it means you shouldn’t know.”

“So it means she knows how angry I am at her! She could’ve... Now I’ll never know how... are they seeds or have they—”

At the table Grip hasn’t reached yet, Martin Aleksandrovich has let out a loud whistle.

“*Come on*,” Derevyashko looked over at his phone. “*Just a bunch of idiots.*”

“*What’s up?*”

“*An armed robbery.*”

“What’s happening?”

“Some thugs at bay—”

Heavy steps marked Marek’s arrival, an apologetic old man towered behind him.

“Go, go, go, now! Feds, in the front, fists, right behind them!”

Grip stopped to put the cup back and to watch how the cool (counter?)intelligence officers pick pizza: they grab boxes from almost the very bottom of the stack. Martin took one, Derevyashko took two. Makes sense, these should be the ones with the most pizza left inside.

Turns out, local gravity turned Irakli Kosmovich into a good runner. As they were approaching the exit, the intelligence officers covered themselves from the rain with pizza boxes, while Marek produced a phone that discussed the news loudly:

“—for a long time. Andy, could you recall such a daring raid?”

“No, time to call my grandma. A raid, what a word, a raid, that’s something from her era indeed. The police has already—”

The sound from the phone has yielded to the screams of the crowd, awaiting them despite the rain. It was already dark, and one couldn’t make out people, save for the yellow police officers along their way. The black limousines were washed by a sea of glowing signs, the writings on them didn’t matter anyway. Grip wouldn’t mind those limousines to be taller and longer.

“Tha-li-a! Tha-li-a!” the crowd began to chant.

“*Daddy, daddy, why rob somebody on Amster?*” Thalia zipped through this chaos like a fish in the water.

“*Good question!*” Martin Aleksandrovich ran out of breath.

“*What do you think?*”

“*What’s the problem?*” Grip tried to catch up with them.

“Bye, colleagues!” Dan screamed behind them.

Grip turned around: Dan folded himself twice over to fit into the limousine, Lisa jumped into the other one.

“*Say, I robbed you and took your—*” Thalia moved closer to Grip.

“*—yeah, yeah?—*”, the young fed unencumbered with worldly possessions mocked her, as he sped up before the gate.

“*You’re a bad example! Just pants and—*” Thalia gave up and sprinted on, skipping over three steps at once to catch up with her dad. “*I know! They didn’t just snatch some secret, they wanted to humiliate them!*”

“*Attagirl! Could be,*” Martin Aleksandrovich donned a wide smile, as he followed Marek deeper into the hall and turned



to catch his daughter with his free hand. *"Espionage and reputational damage. Smells like I've got a kistin one in here,"* he lowered the box, but Thalia wasn't interested in pizza.

*"And I've got a—"* Derevyashko opened one of his boxes.

*"Wait, are we on the run? Was it the robbery—"* Grip pointed at his boxes.

*"Oh yeah, totally us,"* Martin played along. *"Can't even cross a street without robbing someone."*

*"Martin, what—"*

*"Yeah?"* he turned towards the voice.

*"—in the world are you doing in here?"* Aksat Dzhonatanovich mocked him.

*"Where?"*

*"In the embassy!"*

*"I don't know... Everybody ran, and so did I,"* he replied with an innocent face. *"Guess I gotta go then? Is the subway pass still there?"*

*"Let's go, you absolute..."* Marek replied through his hand glued to his face.

They haven't yet settled in the hall, as the entire space to the left of the door turned into a giant screen.

*"Officers!"* a grim face that could rival Svobodin's portraits in monumentality barked all over the room.

Wait, not a grim, rather—no—

*"Stay in good health, comrade General!"* Aksat and Dmytro snapped into attention.

Grip stood where he was, disoriented. And the face: white-

haired, angular, general's face was not alive, it flowed in between emotions, never fully settling for one.

*"At ease, at ease you are after closing planets! I'm already—"*

*"Hi, pops!"*

*"—informed on your shenanigans, so listen closely. Kirenko— Who's that?!"* his unnatural eyes popped out. *"Send her off, right now!"*

Thalia took offence at that, and slowly walked out into the hallway. The face has goofily turned its eyes towards the very wall it was displayed on. Grip considered retreating to Irakli Kosmovich's corner, but decided against it.

*"Special comms, son of a gun... So, Kirenko got there first, now you owe him a big one. Derevyashko, you stay. Plan 'shadow'."*

*"Aye plan 'shadow'!"* Derevyashko's face skewed from the bad news.

*"... .. Right. Down with your unhinged antics."*

*"Beggars can't be choosers,"* Aksat said in a soothing voice.

*"You stirred that up, you calm it down,"* Thalia's pops continued in the meantime. *"Tomorrow, eighth, at six, on the carpet, public flogging, then we'll think what to do with that kindergarten of yours."*

*"Aye eighth at six!"*

*"You're free to go."*

*"I have the honour!"*

*"... As for the conscience, we'll print you a new one."*

The face has disappeared. Aksat Dzhonatanovich and Dmytro Ivanovich stood straight, looking at each other.

*“What’s ‘plan shadow’?” Grip asked.*

*“That, Grip, means every kid gets an adult assigned,”* Aksat Dzhonatanovich awakened and turned to him.

*“Ow.”*

Dmytro Ivanovich didn’t wake up, just brought the pizza to the table without coming to his senses.

*“How bad is that?”* Grip asked, examining Derevyashko.

*“This changes everything,”* Aksat has dodged the question. *“I’d like to see where would we get the budget for all of this. By the way, since we’re here, we’ve got a serious discussion ahead.”*

They sat around the table. Dmytro calculated something complex in his head, turning more and more similar to his dissociate copy from Epsilon Indi 3. Aksat Dzhonatanovich eyed him down with disapproval, but Dmytro ignored the hint, so he had to do the talk himself.

*“OK, I can do it, no problem,”* he grunted. *“Something tells me, Grip, that you don’t want to work for us any more.”*

*“I want to go home,”* Grip nodded.

*“Goes without saying. I mean, after—”*

Marek peeked into the room and Aksat Dzhonatanovich got distracted:

*“The two of us, urgent.”*

*“Yeah-yeah, I figured,”* he nodded. *“You two go first, Stalina-Irakli follow, Grip — in two days.”*

*“What do you mean, ‘in two days’?”* Grip wondered.

*“Medical considerations.”*

*"And what am I supposed to do here?"*

*"If you want to argue, argue with doctor Krolewski," Marek dismissed him. "Spare me from this—"*

*"Can I at least get a phone?"*

*"Go annoy comrade envoy about that, I guess."*

*"Do you want to text your mom?" Derevyashko awakened. "I can send it now."*

*"I want to not get lost? At the very least? Like, suppose I go for a walk tomorrow and disappear? What would you do?"*

*"Call the police," Marek threatened. "By the next day they'll track you down, for sure. Are we done?"*

*"If I can't have a phone, can we at least get some tea?"*

*"What am I, a butler? One day on New Amsterdam, and now he wants a butler," Marek mused as he left.*

*"So," Aksat Dzhonatanovich returned to the conversation.*

*Derevyashko was still solving whatever complex problem it was.*

*"Sure, your specialization is quite an exotic one— and now, thanks to you, also hardly relevant for a while—"*

*"Have you not noticed that I've ruined everything? Smuggled an alien, died and closed a planet?"*

*"Well, if you put it like this, it does sound like a train wreck," Aksat Dzhonatanovich smiled at him. "Watch and learn: earned the trust of fists and aliens alike, manifested commendable initiative, self-sufficiency— no, proved capable of highly autonomous—"*

*"Risky life!" Irakli Kosmovich added from his faraway corner.*

*“—took the responsibility and made a hard decision to... now, that I’m not a fan of the outcome, that’s a different story. Was it at least fun?”*

*“You bet. Will I have to move?”*

*“Yes, to Arkadia. Is that a problem?”*

*“Mom’s job... well, dad’s as well—”*

*“And who’s our mom?”*

*“A scout—”*

*“A geoscout,” Derevyashko surfaced back for a second.*

*“Uranium. Expeditions, rovers, all that stuff.”*

*“Yup. Maybe I should move after school?”*

*“Yeah,” Aksat Dzhonatanovich sighed. “Mom, these are serious matters. I get it, we need to think about it.”*

*“Can he be my boss?” Grip pointed at Dmytro Ivanovich.*

*“Not any more,” Aksat Dzhonatanovich sighed again. “Only one head over now. OK, I see, go home first, get some rest, we’ll think this through.”*

*“Can’t you just print ten more of him, and that’s it? He would be his own—”*

*“No way,” Dmytro Ivanovich snapped out of it and shook his head. “Never again.”*

Marek returned with a teapot, they opened the pizza boxes and Dmytro began to thaw back to life.

*“Don’t worry that much,” Marek suggested. “Life goes on, you kept your department and your position, what else would you want?”*

*“I would’ve totally closed you down,” Stalina remarked.*

Everyone has forgotten about her.

*"Why does he need us back so urgently?" Derevyashko ignored her.*

*"He doesn't," Aksat Dzhonatanovich replied. "It's so that you won't bite your elbows for two days straight. Breathe in, breathe out, compose yourself. We're coming home."*

Grip brought a piece of pizza to Irakli Kosmovich idling in his armchair.

*"No, no, take it," he shook his head. "I don't need it, I'll be hopping soon. And you've got two more days ahead, doing who knows what."*

*"Can I ask you, how do you find paper everywhere?" Grip nodded towards the textbook by the armchair.*

*"Nothing interesting, really. I've got a friend living here, she brought it."*

*"Can you leave it to me to read?"*

*"Maybe," Irakli Kosmovich let out a cunning smile. "Would you return it to the author for me?"*

*"Me— author?" Grip jumped at the cover. "Uh— Which one?"*

*"Farah. What a narrow miss for the two of you, second time in a row. But I have to warn you, that was a trick question. Now, without access to lizards, she'll pick you apart and sift through the bones herself, day and night. I'd think twice if I were you."*

*"Are you kidding me? Sounds... interesting, at the very least. Of course, I'll bring it to her, no doubt..."*

*"Up to you, lad. You have been warned..."*

Irakli Kosmovich pulled out his phone, pressed something and

now stared at it blankly.

*"Right, and you're off the comms."*

*"Yeah."*

*"That way I can't send neither her nor you... Yeah. Let's... Oh. Let's do it the old-fashioned way, like our ancestors used to do it on Earth,"* he reached for the crossword that Thalia hadn't completed. *"When I'll get her address, I'll write it down and leave it here, then you get there and hand it over."*

*"Deal. Where did you get this one from?"*

*"Ah, from a newspaper,"* he turned it over to show the front page. *"The embassy has a subscription for the third century straight, how neat is that?"*

Irakli Kosmovich then rambled at length on how proud he is of Grip and Thalia, and how everyone should raise their children from now on, which only made Grip blush. Derevyashko just said "we'll stay in touch", Aksat Dzhonatanovich bid no farewell, and Stalina let out such an insincere "it was nice to work together", that she'd better kept quiet.





## **(Not) commended**

Grip woke up to heavy boots stomping in the hallway. He sprang up, hugging the massive blanket, and the stomping stopped. Same room, New Amsterdam before dawn outside, same portraits circling him inside. Creepy.

Grip dressed up quietly, looked into Svobodin's photo as if it was a mirror, put his hair down with his hands, opened the door silently, peeked left, peeked right, right up the barrel of a rifle...

*"Halt, who's that?"* the voice croaked a bit too late.

An utterly confused man in black uniform stared at him from the dimly lit hallway.

*"I halt,"* Grip echoed.

*"Who in the world are you?"* The man removed the finger off the trigger and slowly lowered his gun.

*"I'm Grip, and who are you?"* Grip regained confidence, blood pumping in his head.

*"The one who stayed behind? What are you doing here?"*

*"Sleeping. I'd like to stay here, yes,"* Grip chuckled nervously.

*"Ideally, not forever."*

*"Yikes, I'm sorry, kiddo,"* he exhaled. *"You startled me."*

*"I? Startled you?"*

*"I expected you to be taller."*

*"Taller?... I mean, were I taller, you'd shoot me on sight?... But I was not, so it was inconvenient?"*

The rifle owner wasn't in the mood for jokes.

*"Hey, you were heading somewhere, weren't you? How about you keep going."*

Grip didn't argue and rushed to the restroom with twice his former enthusiasm.

*"Good morning,"* he bowed, without looking, to the old man at the table.

The man raised his eyes from his notebook and squinted at Grip rushing past. And on Grip's way back, he became even more interested in the kid.

*"What are you doing over there?"*

he asked him as soon as he crossed the doorway.

*"Washing,"* Grip didn't follow.

*"No, why are you sneaking in the guest wing at night?"*

*"Sleeping?"*

*"Come here, young lad."*

No, Svobodin wasn't an old man yet. Elderly? Isn't it the same thing? Much older than portraits. Slightly older than photos. Definitely younger than Irakli Kosmovich.

*"You're not Maksimka,"* he ruled.

"Mmm, I'm not," Grip agreed. "I'm Grip—"

"Whose are you like this?" the secretary general said something confusing. "Voronov's?"

"No, I'm Stavropolskiy—"

"Sure. Voronov's?"

"How can I be Voronov's? He has a daughter."

"What daughter, what daughter, when it has always been sons?"

Svobodin lowered his head and Grip stepped back. "Don't mess with me, I remember everyone. No, not Friedrich and Engels... Carl and Martin, right!" he straightened back. "Look at him, arguing with me... The nerve of this one... Hey, Stavropolskiy, aren't you that brat who closed a Fist planet?"

"Yeah, that one—"

"See! And you said you weren't Voronov's. Attaboy. How you did them fists..."

"How... did I do them fists?"

"Like this," Svobodin flicked him on his nose, and he laughed out of surprise. "Just like this, an entire planet, together with the lizards. That's our man. How many heroes out there, their names no longer fit in here."

Time and time again, it was unclear whom does the secretary general talk with.

"Are you here because of us?"

"No, no. Diplomatic horseplay, you know, work. Come over here, see for yourself, real dog work. Today we're erasing Sokolovskiy."

He opened the notebook again and raised the eraser. Grip

scanned the table: no, there was no pencil in sight. The corner of the notebook was marked “II. 156”, the sheets were covered in faint text in Russian cursive so chaotic, Grip couldn’t make out a thing. He bent forward, leaning on the table.

*“And what are we looking at?”*

*“The Book of Fate, duh!”*

He smudged the eraser against the word that did indeed look like “Sokolovskiy”, or at least, started with an “S” and featured a “y”. The word became two smudges fainter, remaining about as visible as before, but Ilya Ilyich was clearly satisfied with the result, already searching for the next occurrence.

*“There once was a Sokolovskiy, now there is no Sokolovskiy.”*

*“Harsh,”* Grip noted.

*“But just,”* Svobodin echoed. *“All right, why am I boring—”*

And that’s when the table failed Grip, as it started rumbling towards the secretary general. Instinctively, Grip managed to do the only right thing: fall a little to the same direction, catch the moment, when the table stops sliding, carefully push himself away and stand straight before the assassin speeding at him downs him on the spot. A bald teen, his skin as grey as the walls before dawn, stopped right before Grip, exhaled into his hair and pulled the table back in place.

*“Stasik, why are you so jumpy today?”* Ilya Ilyich scolded his guard. The guard paid zero attention to the scolding. *“We were just chatting.”*

*“Live another day,”* Stasik addressed Grip from a hair away. *“Svobodin said you’re free to go.”*

*"Have a nice day,"* Grip retreated to the stairs.

He ran upstairs and hid behind his old friend with an assault rifle.

*"What's up down there?"*

*"I need Marek,"* Grip panted.

*"Pertsev? Marek Istmatovich? Easy as pie. Don't you know, he hears everyone!"*

*"So what?"*

*"I don't know. Summon him three times,"* he half-joked. *"What if it works."*

*"Marek Istmatovich. Marek Istmatovich. Marek Istmatovich,"* Grip repeated and opened his eyes.

No dice. Grip walked further down the hallway, returned.

*"Maybe he's still asleep?"* the man shrugged. *"Wait some more."*

*"Oh, I forgot about the book,"* Grip sighed and headed back to his room. *"I'll sit here, OK?"*

*"Why not."*

Marek didn't come. Grip didn't want to venture downstairs again. About half an hour later he heard the heavy steps wandering off. He waited a bit more and peeked outside. No one around.

*"Marek Istmatovich. Marek Istmatovich. Marek Istmatovich,"* Grip repeated. *"Ollie ollie oxen free."*

Before he turned into the hall, Grip hid behind the corner once again. Slowly peeked and observed the walls. No one in sight. He went to the centre of the room, to the windows, checked behind the curtain, looked behind once again, peeked outside.

The crowd has evaporated, the street was open to cars again, the Institute of hybrid law enforcement stood across the street. Grip kept looking and found two weirdos to the right of the gates that he definitely didn't want to run into.

*"Marek Istmatovich. Marek Istmatovich—"*

Approaching steps. Lora-Laura hastily entered the room with a phone in her hand.

*"Marek is busy, and he has an offer for you."*

*"Eh?"*

*"You take this phone, and you don't come back until tomorrow."*

*"A phone, a book and two comic books,"* Grip immediately started bargaining.

*"What book?"*

*"Irakli Kosmovich should've left one for me,"* Grip turned and saw it.

*"That one? No, I'm not telling him this,"* Lora change the subject abruptly.

*"What?"*

*"None of your business. A phone, a book and you don't set your foot in this house today. Now."*

Grip grabbed the phone, dashed for the book and ran, happy, straight for the front door. He avoided the two on the right by turning left right away and sprinting as fast as he could, then taking another left, until he found some microscopic park. He then jumped over the shrubs, sat at a bench and exhaled:

*"Free the kids!"*

The book had a crossword, the crossword featured an address at the top:

“Farnborough 114/216 Institute of applied linguistics, Farah Strong”.

Grip checked out the phone and got stuck in the interface for almost half an hour. It was kind of intuitive, yet everything was wrong. Took him just a second to learn he has a staggering total of five point zero zero zero grams to his name. And an eternity to reach the deepest corner of the settings to learn that his name today was Anton Novoseltsev. Marking the embassy and Farah’s address on the map: just a couple of minutes. Learning he’s in Highborough, and how huge is that Highborough thing, and that Farnborough, fortunately, neighboured that Highborough — ten more minutes. Thalia must also be in this Highborough thing.

The dawn broke in the meantime. A mom with a pram went past, a toddler followed her. Some runner passed in the background. But cars, cars were already queueing up to spend their day in traffic. Grip liked running away from his problems, so he decided against taking the subway; after all, reaching that Farnborough on foot seemed plausible. But first he needs food. Why can’t you just hop every day? It wasn’t nice the first time, on Arkadia, but otherwise Grip loved hopping.

Food was very clustered here. Ten more minutes later, after filtering the ggggg and gggg places off the map, Grip arrived at a conclusion that canteens just don’t exist on New Amsterdam

altogether. The closest thing to a canteen he could find was quite off route, so he was doubly disappointed when he arrived at the place, and the pavement just ceased to exist. With no visible entrance and no plausible way to reach it anyway, he set off for the next one, slightly worried about its picture featuring just two chairs and a table occupying half the pavement. But that one had pavement!

Indeed, there it was. Two chairs, a table, a menu, and a tiny window in the wall too high for him to peek inside. Grip found the familiar words from yesterday on the menu.

“Hello?” he knocked, and the window opened. “I’d like a burger and a bottle of Frizzings, please.”

“You’re not from ’round here, are you?” a voice rumbled above his head.

“No, I’m not.”

“A Fed?”

“Yeah.”

“Just so you know, that thing’s sweet.”

“I know, thank you. Where do I pay here?”

“You can hand the phone to me, and I’ll handle it for you.”

“I’d rather not,” Grip held his phone tighter.

“Smart boy. Tap the menu, read carefully and confirm twice.”

A staggering two hundred milligrams poorer, Grip sat at the flimsy table and bit into his burger. Probably not one of those his boss was so impressed with. An old lady passed by, and Grip made out her blabbering:



“—handsome in his uniform, such a self-sufficient fellow, dining here alone, all by himself—”

For a second, he considered chasing her to share his achievements for the past week— or a month, rather? —but the politeness and the language barrier prevailed.

*“Self-sufficient, alright. I bought food, and I ate it, all by myself. So handsome. Out-right-standing,”* he kept mumbling in between the bites.

The border between Highborough and Farnborough couldn't be more clear, and not because of the interchange: Farnborough was the high-rise one. And, high above its grandeur, was the rain cloud heading from the bay, which, initially, didn't concern Grip. But as soon as the first, warning drops of water reminded him how does the rain work, Grip suddenly realized how utterly water-permeable he was in his Rosario school uniform and with a paper book to boot. He hid in an unmarked transparent booth along the way. Now the occasional passers-by unconcerned with the upcoming rain gawked at him, their faces so puzzled, that Grip began to doubt his plan. He waited for the street light to turn green and dashed for the trees two blocks away. OK, rather, a single majestic tree, one that counts as an entire park. A tall young woman on the bench under the tree put her phone aside and cheered and rooted for Grip's almost dry arrival.

“Woo-hoo, you made it!” she announced out loud.

“I made what?” Grip rammed into the other side of the bench.

“Made it here, all dry!”

“Ah, haha, yeah. Hello!”

“I’m Lisa!”

“I’m Grip!”

“What are you doing under my tree, Grip?” she butchered his name beyond recognition.

“Is it your tree?” Grip turned to check it out. “It’s wonderful—”

“No,” she laughed, “but I come here so often, I grew to pretend that I’m the spirit of this tree.”

“That’s cool!” Grip liked the idea. Lisa was cut out for the tree spirit job. “Nice tree, spirit! Nice spirit, tree!”

“Thank you,” she laughed for a little more. “But you just make it sound like I need a real hobby.”

“Let’s find you a hobby. What do you like to do? Except coming here to be a spirit?”

“I don’t know...”

“I think walking is a hobby. Already.”

“Yeah, everybody’s driving these days... I’ve heard that, back on Earth, we used to be hunters, and we outwalked our prey to death, mile after mile. Sounds so metal. But I don’t think walking is a hobby, is it?”

“Why not? If you walk hard, it becomes a sport, right? So, why not a hobby?”

“Dunno... But look, if I don’t think it’s a hobby, then it means it’s not gonna—I mean, at least for me...”

“OK, what would you like to do right now?”

“Right after my night shift? Lie down and cease to think.”

“If that means you’re tired, then you need to do something with

your brain.”

“Like what?” she snorted. “Like education?”

“Could be just singing something. While walking here. Or back.”

“That sounds so weird.”

“Or learning poems.”

“That sounds even weirder,” she giggled.

“Only if you do it aloud! If you do it in your head, it’s not.”

“Well...”

The rain poured down, so they had to raise their voices.

“And what are you doing here? Where are your parents?”

“On another planet! I’m travelling without them.”

“Oh, really?” she was surprised and worried. “So you’re a traveller? Have you seen the Gates already?”

“Not yet. What is it?”

“Are you sure you’re a tourist?”

“I’m not a tourist, I’m an explorer,” Grip hugged the book tighter.

“An explorer, huh? That sounds so old-school. So, how do you find Amster?”

“Wet.”

Lisa laughed out loud.

“That’s one... astute observation. Where else have you been?”

“I’ve been to four planets—” Grip counted.

“Wow!”

Grip swallowed the “—this month” he had at the tip of his tongue.

“I should’ve travelled when I was little!” Lisa exclaimed. “... OK, that is mighty impressive of you, young explorer. And these are

your travel notes?"

Grip opened the book in the middle towards her.

"Yikes! You can actually read that?"

"Yes, I can!"

"And write it?"

"You bet," Grip shone like a diamond.

"Take this thing away from me," she shook her head.

"You wanted a hobby, right? You can try lizard! It's simple, actually. There's not a lot of words, and they connect with—"

"No-no-no, don't even think about it. Have some mercy. Back when they tried to cram Russian into my skull, it just broke something and fell out, but this, this is something else entirely. I mean, look at this thing, how does one even read that?"

"That's the thing!" Grip put the book aside and raised his finger.

"Yesterday— I learned that everybody reads them differently! Turns out— I mean— there are at least three wrong ways to do it, and only one of my friends does it right! Now I also want to learn the right way."

The pieces finally started to fall into place for Lisa.

"Wait a minute," she looked at him, as if she saw Grip anew.

"You're an explorer."

"Correct," Grip nodded with a sinking feeling.

"And you're studying their language. To go there—"

Seeing all these emotions parade across Grip's face, Lisa realized she must've said something terribly wrong:

"Oh no! I'm so sorry! I forgot they closed their— I— I'm sorry, I didn't mean to— I'm sure you'll find a way to visit it!"